

*The
Billionaire's
Obsession*
Marcus

Billionaire

UNVEILED

J.S. Scott

NY TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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Unveiled*

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Prologue



Dani

A Year Ago...

I knew I was going to die.

The only question was how long I had to live before the rebel group of terrorists who had kidnapped me would finally execute me.

I was hurting so badly that I was grateful when I lost consciousness. I had no idea how long I'd been imprisoned. It seemed like years, like I'd lived in this perpetual state of pain, deprivation, and humiliation for what seemed like forever. I'd tried to keep track of the days passing by, but I'd probably lost a few.

How long had I been like this?

A week?

Two?

Had I lost more days than I'd thought?

Death would pretty much be a blessing. I'm not sure how much more of their torture I can take. I'm not getting out of here. The US wouldn't bargain with terrorists, and I'm never going to escape. Even if I had the opportunity, I don't have the strength to get away.

It's not that I wanted to die, but there was only so much agony a person could endure before they hoped for some reprieve, even if it meant they'd only find that relief from death.

At least it was late into the night, a small portion of the twenty-four-hour day that I'd come to welcome because the terrorists were all sleeping. It was the only time I wasn't terrified they'd decide to stroll in to torment me.

I was curled into a ball in the middle of the dirt floor, trying desperately not to think about food, water, or the fact that every inch of my body felt like I'd been used as a punching bag.

Reminding myself that my sacrifice had meant that some teenagers had been able to get their butts back across the border to safety was a fact I tried to hang onto with everything I had. I'd probably have to die so a bunch of kids could live.

It was a decent trade-off, right? If it was one or the other—which it had been—it was better for one person to die than a bunch of kids.

My issue with my reasoning was that I really didn't *want* to die. The survivor in me wanted *all* of us to live.

Unfortunately, the tiny portion that was left of my rational brain told me that wasn't possible.

I tried to take a deep breath, but it hurt so bad to breathe. I exhaled gently, trying to convince myself that for now, I was alone and wasn't likely to be disturbed until daylight.

No sooner had I told myself I was safe for a few hours, when a big hand slapped over my mouth with absolutely no warning. I fought the adversary, determined not to go down without a fight, even though I had very little strength.

I always fought.

It was just the way I was wired.

The nighttime was mine, the only chance I had to think—if I could stay conscious—and it pissed me off that the few hours I had to rest were being taken away from me.

I was sick of being a source of entertainment for the rebels whenever they wanted to torment me. I wished they'd just kill me and get it over with. If they did, the fighter in me would remain forever silent.

“Danica. It's Marcus Colter. I'm getting you out of here. Stay quiet.”

The harsh whisper finally invaded my sluggish brain. *Marcus Colter?* What in the hell was he doing *here?*

I had to wonder if I was getting delusional. Marcus was an international businessman, a custom suit-wearing billionaire. Yes, he *did* always seem to show up in dangerous areas of the world. But why would he be in the desolate camp where I was being held prisoner?

I stopped trying to fight him, realizing that he was attempting to help me. “Marcus?” I said weakly once he'd uncovered my mouth.

He didn't speak, but he made a big slashing gesture for me to stop making any noise, and I could see it pretty plainly in my dimly lit prison.

Normally, I didn't like Marcus Colter. When we were in a civilized environment, we did nothing but antagonize each other. But right now, his voice gave me a glimmer of hope. At the moment, he was more friend than foe. Squinting into the darkness, I tried to make out the features of his face, but his form was pretty much a shadow, a man dressed entirely in black.

He met no resistance as he picked me up. I wrapped my arms around his neck with whatever strength I could muster, staying as quiet as possible as he carried me past the tents and out of the place where I'd thought I was going to breathe my last breath.

I buried my face in his neck, absorbing his scent like a sponge thirsts for water. He smelled like safety and freedom,

and after all I'd been through at the hands of the rebels, it was an irresistible smell.

It seemed like he walked for hours until we arrived at a Jeep. Marcus jumped in quickly, holding me on his lap, the vehicle sprinting into motion the moment we were settled.

I couldn't speak. Not only was the action difficult due to my dry mouth and my cracked lips, but everything that was happening seemed...surreal.

Was I really being rescued or was I delirious?

My brain was so muddled that I just didn't know.

Getting my freedom back wasn't something I'd expected. I'd been resigned to the fact that I was *never* going to make it beyond the camp where I was being imprisoned.

The only thing I knew is that I *wanted* this to be real. But it didn't make sense.

And why was Marcus Colter here?

At one time, he'd done some private rescues of international prisoners, but his group had disbanded some time ago. My brother, Jett, had been injured in the ill-fated mission that had been the last for Marcus and the Private Rescue Organization. The only way my rescue could be happening is if he'd gotten the team back together again.

I suppose it wasn't impossible that he'd pulled a group of guys together. But my brother was definitely out of commission, and so were a few others who'd been wounded in the helicopter crash that had ended PRO's existence.

I wanted to thank him for risking his life to save mine, but I couldn't quite get the words out of my mouth. Maybe I'd always hated him for what he'd done to my older sister, Harper. But the incident with my sibling had occurred over a decade earlier, and I *was* grateful that Marcus Colter had snuck over the border and into Syria to rescue me. The mission was almost suicidal, yet he'd done it.

I moaned softly from the pain as the Jeep came to an abrupt stop and Marcus shifted my body to get out of the vehicle, and then handed me over to somebody in a helicopter.

I made it out. I'm going to live.

The realization that I wasn't going to die at the hands of my black-hearted tormentors was almost too much to comprehend.

Tears of relief trickled down my cheeks, but my body was so weak that I couldn't move. My mind was sluggish from deprivation and torture, but I knew everything I needed to know:

I was safe.



I felt much better a few days later as I ended my call with Harper to let her know I was still alive, and that I was getting more physically stable every day.

Maybe I *did* need to gain a few pounds, but with my love of all things junk food, I'd regain the weight I'd lost. I was well hydrated with the help of IV fluids, and my brain was finally functional again.

Dropping my cell phone onto the bedside table, I mumbled to myself, "I need to get the hell out of here."

There was nothing I hated more than hospitals, and I'd already been in the large medical facility in Istanbul much longer than I could tolerate.

Truth was, I wanted out of the Middle East. I wanted to be back on US soil.

"Talking to yourself again?" Marcus Colter drawled as he strolled through the door of my hospital room.

I wished I could deny his claim, but I'd been completely alone until he'd walked in, and it was obvious that I was done with my phone call. Honestly, I *did* tend to talk to myself a lot

since I was usually alone. “I’m bored,” I said. It was a lame excuse, but it was *partly* true.

I hadn’t been out of my hospital bed except to use the restroom since I’d been admitted to the hospital. I wasn’t used to being idle. My job as a foreign correspondent kept me traveling and extremely busy almost every minute of the day.

I looked up at Marcus as he stopped at my bedside, noting that he looked as handsome as ever in a custom suit and tie that almost matched the gray of his eyes.

“You’ll survive,” he drawled with very little sympathy. “You need to stay until your condition improves. You have to be strong enough to travel.”

As usual, I wanted to slap the smug look off his face. Unfortunately, I’d seen the exact same expression too many times in the past. Everywhere I went, it seemed like Marcus was there. If a certain area of the world was a hot spot, I never had any question as to whether or not Marcus would show up. He always did, although I had no idea *why* he always seemed to be in the most screwed-up places in the world. Being a journalist, I had good reason for being wherever there was trouble. But Marcus was a businessman, and he no longer did any work with PRO. So why was it that he was always in the middle of anything bad that was happening on the planet?

“I’m better,” I argued. “I’m strong enough.”

Marcus lifted an arrogant brow. “You wouldn’t make it past the hospital door before you collapsed,” he observed. “You’re still too weak.”

I wanted to challenge him by getting up and walking out of the hospital, but I was still attached to the IV, and I already knew how much effort it took just to get up and go to the bathroom. I’d done it many times since they were pumping me full of fluids. I crossed my arms over my chest. “I want to go home, Marcus. If I have to, I’ll have one of my brothers come get me.”

I knew I was acting like an ungrateful brat, but the truth was, I was feeling really edgy and anxious. Fear was getting the best of me at the moment, and I couldn't stop the nightmares I'd been having, or the feeling that the rebels might somehow find me.

He shook his head. "They wouldn't do it. I've already talked to everybody in your family. Nobody is letting you out of the hospital until you're stable. It's a long damn trip back to the States. You need more time to get stronger."

I let out an irritated sigh because I knew he wasn't bluffing. Marcus wasn't the type to *not* back up every word he uttered. If he said he'd talked to my family, I *knew* it was true.

Honestly, I wasn't sure exactly *how* I felt about Marcus Colter now. My phone call with Harper had been intriguing. And it *had* let the eldest Colter brother off the hook for being an asshole to my sister, Harper. It was hard to believe it had been *Blake*, Marcus's identical twin, who had slept with my elder sister and broken her heart over a decade ago. That had been one of the reasons why seeing Marcus unsettled me, but it wasn't the only one.

Marcus could easily be the most stubborn, cynical, irritating ass I knew, and he hadn't changed a bit since the last time I'd seen him.

However, he *had* saved my life.

Before, I'd always had a reason to dislike him over what had happened with Harper. Now, I wasn't sure how to treat him. Yeah, he was still a jerk sometimes, but other than his overinflated male ego, I really had no reason to hate him anymore.

"So when can I go?" I asked in an annoyed tone. "I'll go stir-crazy if I stay here much longer."

"You just got hydrated. It's going to be at least another week."

I rolled my eyes. “It’s just a plane ride to get back home.”

Really, all I wanted was to get out of the Middle East and back to the US. I’d feel safer, but I didn’t want to tell Marcus how nervous and tense I was feeling. Technically, I was in a safe place, and I didn’t want to sound crazy or paranoid.

The two of us had always had a fairly level playing field. This area was my turf, the place where I did most of my reporting.

Now, it was the setting for most of my nightmares.

He dropped a large bag he’d been carrying onto the bed beside my hip. “Here’s something to combat your boredom.”

I rummaged through the sack, finding some books I’d wanted to read, a deck of cards, some of my favorite junk food, and a small chess set. “You play chess?” I asked. “Obviously I can’t play alone.”

He nodded. “I do.”

“How did you know that I played?” I queried.

He shrugged. “Jett might have mentioned it.”

I smiled. “None of my brothers can even challenge me anymore.”

“I’ll win. I always do,” Marcus told me arrogantly.

I eyed him carefully as I opened a bag of chips and started munching on them like I’d been deprived. I let the salty taste flow over my taste buds, and I nearly moaned with satisfaction. He opened the small chess set and started setting up the pieces as I watched. Marcus radiated power, control, and a hefty dose of self-confidence, which was a nice way of saying he could be an arrogant prick. But that didn’t mean I could ever forget the fact that his mere presence filled the room with tension.

I’d done little but trade jabs with Marcus in the past, and I wasn’t sure quite how to interact with him now that I knew he

wasn't responsible for sleeping with Harper and hurting her so badly.

"Chips?" I asked, offering him the open bag.

He frowned. "No, thanks. I avoid processed foods and excess salt. That stuff is bad for you."

I shrugged, pulling the chips back. I was only giving him one shot. I was greedy when it came to my snacks. "If I give up everything that isn't good for me, life would be boring."

After being deprived of food for so long, I planned on devouring every healthy and unhealthy bit of food I could get.

"Your brother, Jett, says the same damn thing," Marcus answered in a disgusted tone.

"I guess it's a family thing," I joked.

"I suppose."

"Do you think Harper and Blake will end up together now that the whole mess from ten years ago is finally settled?" I wanted my sister to be happy, and I was pretty sure Blake was the only man in the world who could make Harper settle down. In the decade since they'd parted, my sister had dedicated herself to her career as an architect, and I'd never seen her interested in another guy.

"I have no idea," Marcus answered as he took off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves. "I try not to get into other people's business, especially my family when it comes to their love lives."

I shifted position, sitting up in the bed so I could study the chessboard. "She loves him," I said confidently. "I'm not sure she ever stopped."

"I don't think Blake did either," Marcus admitted.

I nodded. "Then I'm sure they'll sort everything out."

"I hope so," he said in a graveled voice. "If they don't, he'll be moping around like an adolescent."

Deciding that I wanted the black pieces, I spun the board around. “I don’t believe that you don’t care whether or not your twin is happy.”

“I didn’t say that I didn’t care,” he reminded me.

So he does care, but he tries not to get involved? If I judged by Marcus’s attitude on the surface, I’d be tempted to believe he really *didn’t* give a crap about anybody but himself. But his actions told another story. He’d immediately found Blake once Harper had come to him about my kidnapping, and told his twin brother to straighten the mess out. He’d thrown the two of them together on purpose. I was sure he had.

“So you’d be happy if it happened?” I queried.

He didn’t answer immediately. Marcus’s gaze was on the chessboard since he got the first move with the white pieces, a position that gave him a slight advantage.

“Regardless of what you might think of me, I want my brother to be happy,” he replied simply.

I soon found out that prying information out of Marcus was going to take more energy than I had. Unfortunately for me, the guy was an amazing chess player, and I was beyond sorry that I’d allowed him any advantage after he kicked my ass.

Thankfully, he wasn’t the type to gloat too much, but it annoyed me just the same.



It took almost a week to the day I entered the hospital to get back out again. I still had some healing to do, but I was relieved when Marcus’s jet finally got into the air to take us back to the US.

Tate Colter, Marcus’s younger brother and the pilot of my rescue mission, had left yesterday morning, eager to get back to his wife, so I no longer had the distraction of his company. I liked Tate, and I was just as grateful to him as I was to Marcus for risking his life to save me and keeping me company while

I'd recovered. I hadn't gotten a chance to thank the rest of the team because I'd been too sick when they'd left, but I was truly thankful to all of them.

I leaned back against the leather headrest as Marcus's large jet climbed to its cruising altitude. "Thank you for coming to get me," I said in a breathless voice.

Never once had I mentioned my experience with my kidnappers. I answered questions, but I hadn't wanted to talk about it. I still didn't. But I'd thanked Tate before he'd left, and I knew I owed Marcus for taking such a major risk for somebody he barely knew.

"Just try to contain yourself from jumping back into another bad situation," he answered from the seat next to me. "I get why you did it, but you had to have known that you were probably going to end up dead when you crossed the border."

We hit turbulence while the jet was climbing, and I dug my short fingernails into the leather armrest. I'd never been a nervous flier before this trip home, but I was quickly discovering that my experiences in captivity had changed me. "I didn't really think about it before I went," I admitted to Marcus. "My fear for the kids who had crossed over before I did made me throw caution to the wind. I wanted to get them out. I didn't take time to weigh the consequences."

Yeah, maybe my actions *had* been reckless, but it had saved the teenagers.

If I had a choice of watching them die or risking a diversion by crossing over myself, I would do the same thing all over again.

"Think about the danger next time—before you act," he rumbled. "You scared the hell out of your entire family. Harper was beside herself, and your brothers were ready to cross the border to find you themselves, which would have gotten them all dead."

“It’s not like I was *trying* to get kidnapped,” I told him indignantly.

“Another few days of captivity probably would have killed you,” Marcus answered rigidly.

“They were already talking about killing me,” I confessed in a nervous tone, bringing up my captors for the first time all on my own.

“You understood them?”

I nodded as he turned his eyes to my face. “Yes. I speak some Arabic, but I never let on that I did. Since they weren’t getting any money, there wasn’t much reason for them to keep me alive. I guess I wasn’t even any fun to play with anymore. I was too broken down to put up much of a fight.”

“You look better,” he said huskily, his tone slightly more gentle. “What did you do to your hair?”

I ran my fingers through the short pixie cut. “Nothing. The stylist just evened out the cut, and then dyed it all back to my natural color.”

Being a detail guy, Marcus had sent me every service I needed while I was in the hospital, including somebody to fix my hair and try to heal all the cracks and breaks on my skin.

“You’re a redhead?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “But I thought I might have a better shot at the foreign correspondent job if I went blonde. Redheads draw a lot of attention, especially in foreign countries where that hair color is hardly ever seen. I wanted to blend in instead of standing out. I didn’t really want anybody to know who I was.”

Marcus seemed to be satisfied with my answer because he was silent for a few minutes. He wasn’t a guy who spoke just to hear himself talking, a trait I was currently grateful he had.

Once the jet leveled off, I told Marcus, “I think I’ll try to sleep for a while.” I was exhausted from just the mild exercise I’d had during the day. All I’d really done was get discharged from the hospital and made my way to Marcus’s jet. Still, I felt like I’d spent the entire day doing hard labor.

He opened his laptop computer, and without looking at me, he answered, “Bedroom is in the back. Go sleep as long as you want. It’s a long trip.”

“Thanks.” I undid my seat belt and made my way to the back of the large aircraft.

My brothers all had private planes, so it wasn’t unusual for me to see this level of comfort and convenience in a private jet. But it *did* feel strange to be the only other passenger in such a massive aircraft.

The sleeping area had a large king-sized bed, and a bathroom attached. I popped into the restroom to change into a nightgown. Seeing my suitcase next to the bedroom door had been no surprise. Marcus obviously demanded efficiency from his staff, and he got it without question.

“You done with the bathroom?” The sound of Marcus’s voice beside me in the bedroom nearly made me jump out of my own skin. Yeah, I knew he was still on board, but he’d startled me.

Right now, it didn’t take much to make me jumpy.

I nodded. The restroom had two entrances. One connected to the bedroom, and the other was right outside the bedroom door. A quick glance told me that the bathroom door next to the bedroom was closed, and Marcus was just politely checking to see if I was done.

I tried to calm my nerves, berating myself for being so damn jittery, and then looked up at Marcus to reassure him I wasn’t a lunatic.

His sharp, ever-changing eyes were so intense that they felt like they were prying open my soul.

Without looking away from me, he answered, “I wanted to freshen up.” He paused before asking, “Hey, are you okay? You’re really pale.”

“I-I’m fine,” I lied easily.

In truth, I wasn’t feeling well at all. My body was slowly getting stronger, but my mind wasn’t functioning as well as it used to. I obviously startled easily, and I couldn’t seem to keep my thoughts from returning to my time as a captive.

I’m safe. I’m safe.

I wondered if I kept up the mantra for a while, if I’d start to actually believe that nobody was going to hurt me.

“Bullshit,” Marcus cursed. “You look like you can barely stand up.”

He moved closer, his big body crowding me against the wall like he was ready to support me if I fell.

“I’m tired,” I admitted as I continued to look up at him, trying not to react when he put a hand on each side of the wall, leaving me trapped.

“What else, Danica? What’s bothering you? I know that look on your face. I’ve seen it before in other rescue situations.”

Marcus was my only confidant at the moment, so I either told him what was wrong, or I kept it bottled up inside. I decided on the former. “I can’t stop thinking about what happened. I was so damn certain I was going to die, Marcus. Returning to this world, knowing that I’m not going to be hurt again is pretty surreal. I’m happy. I really am. But the fear won’t go away.” The words tumbled out of my mouth awkwardly.

“That’s normal,” he told me. “You can’t survive an ordeal like you went through without developing a heavy dose of worry and anxiety. Do you want to talk about it?”

Yes!

No!

Oh hell, I didn’t know what I wanted. Maybe I *needed* to talk, but I certainly didn’t want to, especially to Marcus. I was too used to always keeping my guard up around him. However, he was all I had right now.

“Not really,” I murmured. “It’s in the past. I just want to be myself again.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t get to you sooner,” Marcus rumbled. “You were at those bastards’ mercy for too damn long.”

“You saved my life,” I reminded him. “And it was a considerable risk for you and the rest of the rescue team. I’m just grateful you got there before I was dead.”

Marcus lifted a hand to my face, and I automatically flinched. But he simply stroked over my bruised skin as he replied, “The assholes will pay for every damn time they touched you, Danica. I swear.”

I shook my head. “I doubt they’ll ever be found.”

“They will,” Marcus contradicted. “All of them are probably dead by now. The military was contacted the moment we moved out of the area so they could do an air strike on the compound.” He paused before asking, “They’re all dead. Does that help?”

Did it help to know that my tormentors were probably no longer alive? I wasn’t certain it made a difference. “I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “They’re still not dead in my mind, Marcus.”

His touch was tender on my damaged skin, and his scent and warmth was intoxicating. Pretending I had Marcus to

protect me helped. My mind was focused on him and the way he made me feel normal again.

“You’ll stay safe, Dani. Nobody is going to hurt you again,” he said with a feral growl.

Hesitantly, I wrapped my arms around his neck, shivering from just the casual contact of my fingers at the nape of his neck. “Thank you,” I whispered, my gaze getting lost in his forceful gray stare.

His head came down slowly, giving me plenty of time to avoid him had I chosen to do so. But I *wanted* Marcus to touch me. I *wanted* to feel alive.

The embrace was gentle, a coaxing meeting of mouths, Marcus trying to cajole something out of me that he couldn’t do with words.

He put his arms around me as he plundered my mouth, his hands stroking down my back and landing on my ass.

The second he pulled me forward, my scantily clad body colliding with his, I lost the sense of protection, heat, and tenderness in his kiss. His bold erection pressed against my lower abdomen, and I panicked, forgetting everything except my instinctive, visceral reaction.

My hands went to his chest, and I started to claw to get away from him. I tore my lips from his, unable to endure the flashes of memory that tore through my head. “No. Please. Don’t.”

“Dani!” Marcus said firmly, giving me a gentle shake. “What the hell happened? Open your eyes.”

His commands finally sunk into my confused brain, and I opened my eyes. I hadn’t even realized that I’d closed them to try to fend off the flashbacks, a spontaneous reaction that had just made them worse.

“Marcus?” His face was right there in my vision. “Oh, God. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for something that isn’t your fault. I’m going to ask you one more time... Are you okay?”

Tears slid down my cheeks as I looked up at him. “No,” I answered. “I don’t think I *am* okay. Right now, I’m not sure I’ll ever be normal again. I feel like a prisoner in my own body. It scares me.”

“I know. Things will get better. But I can’t help you if you don’t want to talk about what happened.” He hesitated, his eyes assessing my face. “You said you weren’t sexually assaulted, but I think you’re lying.”

Breaking easily away from Marcus’s hold, I swiped the tears from my face. “It’s hard to talk about that period of time,” I answered truthfully. “I was degraded, beaten down until I didn’t even want to fight anymore. But I couldn’t *not* try to fend them off. I don’t want *anybody* to know everything that happened to me. I don’t want to keep living it over and over again.”

Every emotion I had seemed to have rocketed to the surface.

I continued, with my back to Marcus. “It was like a horrible nightmare that I couldn’t escape even when I was awake. Especially while I was conscious and fairly alert. At first, it took several men to hold me down while I was raped. Eventually, they only needed a few. As I got weaker, I became easier and easier to use and torture.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Marcus answered sharply, turning me around to face him again.

My own fury became unleashed. “I didn’t want to tell *anyone*. What difference would it make? It’s not like they’re going to be brought to justice in a court of law. My brothers would all want to kill the terrorists.”

Marcus’s expression was outrage. “Fuck that. I want to kill them just for touching you. Believe me, if they weren’t already dead, I’d do the job myself.”

I wrapped my arms around my own body to comfort myself. “Can you keep my secrets?” I asked in a raspy voice. “There’s really no reason for anyone to know.”

“You’ll need counseling, Danica,” Marcus answered hoarsely. “But yes, I can keep your secrets. What you tell people is completely up to you.”

I sat down on the bed, my knees ready to give out from fear. I wanted to talk to somebody, but not my family. He was right. I probably would need therapy after what had happened, but I really didn’t want to share this with my family. My sense of shame and humiliation was too raw. They all thought I was crazy to be running into turmoil and war zones. I didn’t want them to know all the consequences of my job. All it would do was worry them when I eventually wanted to go back to work.

Marcus took off his suit jacket and tossed it over a small dresser in the room, and then took a seat in a chair near the bed. “I’m listening, Danica. Maybe you can’t call me a friend, but I’m here to help if you need me.”

He was composed, seemingly ready to hear about my experience.

The pain.

The terror.

The revulsion and humiliation I’d experienced when I was raped and beaten so often that I wasn’t able to keep track of how many times it happened. And that once the rebels were finished with my body, how I’d wondered if *that time* would be the last.

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat as I glanced at Marcus’s unreadable expression. Uncertain whether I could keep looking him in the eyes while I dumped my entire experience with the terrorists on him, I reached over and switched off the overhead light before I sat cross-legged in the middle of the bed.

Maybe I *couldn't* tell Marcus *every single detail* of my experience as a captive, but I knew I needed to vent and let some of my anger and fear exit my body by putting it all out in the open.

Satisfied that I couldn't see much of his expression in the dim light, I started to talk...

As promised, Marcus listened, occasionally letting me know that how I was feeling was perfectly natural considering what had happened.

By the time the flight was over, I'd collected myself and said a brief good-bye to the man who'd been my comfort and my confidant before I joined my sister in Washington, DC.

It would be a year before we met again, and he'd be responsible for stealing me away from somebody else one more time, but in very *different* circumstances...



Chapter 1



Marcus

The Present...

“**W**hat in the fuck am I doing here?” I muttered to myself irritably as I trudged down the crappy sidewalk in one of Miami’s rougher areas.

The area was dimly lit, and the caliber of the neighborhood I was walking through had gone swiftly downhill. I hadn’t been in Miami for a year or two, but it always amazed me that the affluent areas could abruptly end, and a short walk later, I’d end up in a dump.

Not that I gave a damn. I’d left my car and driver several blocks back, and in a better area. My elderly driver, George, didn’t need to get his blood pressure up any higher, and I’d badly needed to clear my head with a walk before I met up with Danica.

I wasn’t worried about my personal safety. I knew at least a hundred different ways to kill bad guys, and I was packing a loaded Glock under my suit jacket. If anybody wanted to screw with me, I’d make them sorry they were ever born. Hell, I’d actually welcome a decent fight right now. I was just that pissed off.

Dani and I had been in the same city a time or two in Europe, but we hadn’t really seen each other. Okay, maybe I’d seen *her*, but she hadn’t actually seen *me*. I’d known she was there because I’d made it a point to watch out for her and follow her work destinations. It hadn’t really surprised me

when she went back to reporting soon after she'd physically recovered. She was still in hot spots all over the world. The only place I *hadn't* seen her was the Middle East.

Then, a few months ago, I'd stopped seeing her altogether, and I hadn't been able to get much information about where she was going for her stories.

Now I knew why.

I'd been in Seattle a few days ago, and I'd dropped by Jett Lawson's place to see how he was recovering. Even though it had been a couple of years since Jett had nearly gotten killed on our last PRO mission together, he still required surgeries to repair some of his injuries. Most of the operations were cosmetic at this point, done to cover some of his scars. Unfortunately, thanks to his bitch of an ex-fiancée, some of Jett's emotional pain wasn't going to heal anytime soon.

But his own love life and ex-future marital partner hadn't been my buddy's concern when I stopped by to visit. Jett's thoughts had been diverted to his sister Danica's new boyfriend.

"Son of a bitch!" I cursed in an irritated voice as I approached the block where the bar I was seeking was located. "How in the hell did she get mixed up with a loser like Gregory Becker?"

Becker was a rich bastard, but it was doubtful that much of his wealth came from his legitimate businesses. He'd been a suspect at the CIA for a long time, but as of yet, nobody could make any charges stick with solid evidence or intel.

Stopping under a dim streetlamp, I pulled out the picture Jett had given me before I left Seattle, a photo that had been taken by a local newspaper in Miami. Dani had been captured in full color right next to Becker, his arm around her waist, both of them looking pretty damn happy at a charity event the asshole had donated to a few weeks ago.

There had been other photos, and other events where Dani had been by Becker's side. When Jett had asked Dani what she was doing in Miami, and if she was really seeing Becker, she'd told her brother that they were dating and it wasn't all that serious. Apparently, no matter what Jett had told his little sister, she'd refused to heed his warning about Becker. There probably wasn't a single wealthy businessman who didn't know Gregory Becker's reputation. Rumors were constantly flying about his involvement in human trafficking, illegal arms dealing, and a hell of a lot of drugs. He was also supplying much of that ill-gotten money to rebel troops in Syria. That little bit of info wasn't common knowledge. I'd learned that from some of the CIA intel.

How in the hell could Dani be mixed up with somebody who supplied money to rebel groups similar to the one who had held her captive and tortured the hell out of her?

Yeah, maybe Danica *wasn't* immersed in the world of international business, but she *had* to know about Becker. If she hadn't discovered his dirty secrets before, Jett certainly hadn't held back on telling her all about the new guy in her life. *Shit! Didn't she trust her own damn brother?*

Jett's concern for his little sister had brought me here to Miami when I had other places I should be. I kept telling myself that I wasn't here for me, but I knew I was bullshitting myself. For some reason, I'd never been able to forget the haunted look in Dani's eyes after her rescue and on the way home to the States.

Trying to kiss her on the jet had been an idiotic thing to do. Hell, even now, I don't know what had possessed me to touch her. But for some reason, I hadn't been able to stop myself.

Unfortunately, I hadn't known she'd been gang-raped over and over again. The way she had fought me, and the fact that I'd forced her into a full-blown panic, had left me feeling guilty ever since.

However, the moment before it had happened, the instant she'd trusted me before things had gotten out of control—the chemistry that had flared between us had haunted my ass, too.

I wasn't going to even pretend that what I felt for Dani was brotherly, and that I was completely here for Jett.

I'm here for myself, because I can't forget her.

Hell, for some reason, I hadn't even been able to be with another woman since I'd kissed Danica. How fucked up was that?

Not that I had *relationships*, but it would have been nice to have my healthy sex drive back again. One kiss and I'd practically been castrated. I hadn't made an effort to fuck any woman since I'd felt the silky softness of Dani's mouth beneath mine. The desire to get laid had been nonexistent. I was too obsessed with *her*.

I reminded myself that I wasn't *pursuing* her or any kind of relationship. I was just trying to save her ass...again.

The hair stood up at the back of my neck, and it pulled my mind from my fucked-up thoughts.

I shoved the picture back into my pocket and turned, already aware that I was being stalked.

It was almost disappointing that my would-be robber wasn't going to be much of a challenge.

He was all of maybe fourteen or fifteen years old, and didn't come anywhere close to my weight or my slightly-over-six-foot height.

The punk spoke in a voice that was meant to be menacing, but wasn't. Not to me. "Give me your wallet or I'll put this blade through your heart, mister."

Yeah, I'd been a walking target for robbery or mugging since I was strolling through a less than desirable area of Miami late at night in a custom suit. Still, this little prick was

either bold or strung out on drugs if he thought I would just hand him my wallet. “Not happening,” I drawled, annoyed. “Now beat it, kid.”

He raised his arm in a threatening manner, wielding the knife wildly. “You think I’m a kid? I kill people like you every day, dude,” he replied in a cocky tone.

If I ever laughed—which I didn’t—I probably would have snickered. But I didn’t show emotion—not ever. However, the youngster in front of me was rather amusing. He reminded me of an adolescent who had watched too many bad gangster movies.

I reached out, and in a split second I’d snatched his wrist, squeezing a nerve on his lower arm until he was forced to let go, and the weapon dropped onto the sidewalk with the loud clatter of steel meeting the cement. I pushed him into the cold metal of the streetlight pole, his face plastered against the post, and the Glock I’d previously kept concealed at his temple.

“That hurts,” the kid griped nervously.

I leaned into his body and said close to his ear, “A bullet in your head would hurt a hell of a lot more. Go home, get off the drugs, and quit stealing from people to fund your habit.”

“I live in a foster home,” he protested, his voice anxious as I pushed the barrel of the gun into his temple just a little bit harder, hoping to scare the bejesus out of him.

“Then you’re damn lucky to have a roof over your head,” I growled. “Take advantage of it and quit being a little asshole. Keep this shit up and you’ll be dead before you’re legally able to drink.”

I let go of him, but I put my foot over the knife on the ground before he could snatch it. “I said go home,” I warned in an annoyed tone.

“Who the hell are you? I ain’t seen you around on the streets,” the kid asked hesitantly.

“Somebody you don’t want to mess with,” I answered vaguely.

The brat turned around and ran until he was out of my sight. I kicked the knife deep into the bushes next to the sidewalk, just in case he came back for it. I wasn’t about to make it easy to find.

The boy was a bully, and I hated that. I probably should have called the cops and let them take him to jail, but I had bigger things to worry about. And although it was probably wishful thinking, maybe the punk would straighten himself out someday.

Problem was, he was obviously hooked on something. It wasn’t hard to read the desperation of an addict. *Fucking hell!* I hated seeing a guy that young screwed up on drugs.

Shoving the gun back into its concealed holster, I pulled my jacket closed. I hadn’t even taken the safety off. The kid might be a juvenile delinquent, but I still wasn’t about to shoot a boy who probably wasn’t old enough to vote. My only purpose had been to scare the shit out of him.

I brushed off my suit jacket because it was one of my favorites, and then proceeded to walk to the end of the block and to my destination.

When I arrived, I realized the bar was basically a dive, the neon sign in the window blinking like Christmas tree lights.

“Real fucking classy,” I muttered to myself, unable to see Dani in this place.

However, this *was* where she was meeting up with Becker. *This sleazy bar was the best the jerk could do?* Danica was a goddamn Lawson, a woman who had more money than she could ever spend. And *this* is where the two lovebirds were trysting?

Jett had told me where his sister was going for the evening. I wondered if he knew that it was a haven for prostitutes and

drug dealers.

Probably...not. My buddy would most likely lose it if he knew his little sister was hanging out in this dive.

I shook my head as I peered into the front window. If Jett *had* known, he'd have been here, even if he *was* recovering from his latest procedure. Dani's brother would have a damn heart attack if he knew she'd even set foot into this neighborhood and this shithole of a bar.

My eyes scanned the general layout of the small club from the large, very dirty window out front. I didn't see Becker, but I did finally spot a woman alone at the bar. Her hair color gave her away, the deep-red strands now long enough to brush her shoulders.

I grimaced as I noticed the short, black, leather skirt she was wearing, and the skimpy green top that barely covered her breasts. Her black stiletto heels were secured over the lower rung of the round stool, and she was sipping slowly on some fluffy drink that was topped with whipped cream.

"What in the hell are you doing, Danica? You sure as fuck don't belong here," I said in a raspy voice.

The clothes, the location, the boyfriend...everything was wrong. The Danica I was acquainted with wanted nothing more than to chase down a story that she thought needed to be told. She wore a T-shirt and jeans because it made it easier for her to go after her story.

She didn't wear several inches of makeup like she was sporting now.

She didn't need it.

She never had.

Dani Lawson was drop-dead gorgeous without makeup and with hair of whatever color she wanted to tint it.

Protective instincts rose up inside me, emotions I definitely didn't want but couldn't seem to contain.

Unlike Jett, my obsession to watch over Danica was far from platonic, even though I'd never fucked her.

As usual, my cock was standing at attention just from watching Dani sitting at the bar. She was my only weakness aside from my family, and I had a love/hate relationship with the youngest Lawson sibling because of it.

If I wanted to be truthful with myself—which I really didn't—I'd had blue balls for Dani almost from the first moment I met her. Maybe that's why we were always fighting before I'd rescued her in the Middle East. Of course, she *had* been under the false impression that I'd broken her older sister's heart. Or maybe it was because I was generally an asshole, and she had no problem standing up for herself. She was the only woman who'd never had a problem getting into my face if I pissed her off, and she'd actually made fun of me on occasion.

I definitely hadn't liked that, but I did grudgingly admire her for her outspoken, smart-ass demeanor.

I still remembered the stories she'd told about her captivity on our way back from Turkey to the US. That time, she'd been different from the woman I'd previously known. Her vulnerability had practically destroyed me because I knew how she'd been before being kidnapped.

My fists clenched in anger as I remembered her frightened, expressive eyes, and I wasn't sure how she'd even managed to survive the emotional and physical torture.

My eyes scanned the outside area of the club just to make sure that Becker wasn't arriving to meet Danica. Not that I really cared, but I wanted to be prepared if I was going to meet more resistance than just Dani's when I went to take her out of this place.

I'd promised Jett that I'd get his sister away from danger, and this place reeked of evil. Dani didn't belong here, and whatever crazy bullshit Becker was feeding her needed to be cut off now.

As I stepped up to the glass door, I saw a drunken patron sidle up to the bar, using the stable surface to keep him upright.

"Don't touch her. Don't you fucking touch her," I growled as I yanked the door open.

Danica's squeal of alarm rang through the rancid air of the bar just as I stepped inside.

There was a male hand on Dani's ass that didn't belong to me, and anybody touching her *there* who *wasn't* me was completely unacceptable. The trashed male was twice her size, and as his fingers curled around her wrist to try to drag her off the barstool, I lost total control of my reasoning ability. It was something that had never happened to me before, but as I stepped forward, it felt pretty damn good to plant my fist in his face and watch him hit the dirty floor with a satisfying *thud*.



Chapter 2



Dani

I hated this bar.

I hated this area.

I hated the hooker skirt and top I was wearing.

And I *really* hated the sickly sweet drink I was sipping.

However, I also wanted to see Greg Becker, and I knew he'd arrive here eventually. He was habitually late for almost everything, so I knew I'd have to be patient.

"Hey, little lady," a tall, drunk man said to me as he stumbled to the bar. "A sweet thing like you shouldn't be alone. How much?"

My skin crawled as the guy's hand squeezed the cheek of my ass through my tight leather skirt, and his face moved so close to mine that I could smell his rotten breath.

I should expect to be propositioned. I'm in a bar where most of the women are prostitutes. This is where they get most of their hookups.

Nevertheless, I let out a squeamish scream as the cheek of my butt got palmed and squeezed even harder.

"Not for sale," I said in a warning voice, ready to forcibly remove his hands from my body. He was so drunk that he'd probably fall over if he didn't have any support.

I never got the opportunity to test my theory and shake off his grip. One very large fist to the drunk's face and he toppled

like a ton of bricks.

I jerked my head to the left to see who had rescued me.

Then I took a second look.

Marcus? What in the hell was he doing here?

“Let’s go,” he grumbled as he clasped my hand and pulled me awkwardly off the barstool.

I stumbled over the unconscious man at my feet, barely avoiding putting a stiletto in his privates. “I can’t leave. I’m meeting someone,” I protested.

“Not anymore,” he answered in a graveled voice.

I was already outside the door when I dug my heels in, trying to yank my hand from his. Marcus was wicked strong, and I’d be compelled to keep moving if he kept dragging me along. “What are you doing here?” I asked breathlessly, stopping him temporarily, but still unable to break his grip.

“Taking your ass back to where you belong.”

“I belong *here*. I have a date, Marcus. I can’t just leave. I need to see Greg.”

“Didn’t anything Jett told you sink in?” Marcus replied stiffly. “Becker is an asshole and a goddamn criminal.”

“I heard Jett. I just didn’t agree,” I said huffily. “I’m old enough to decide who to go out with, for God’s sake.”

“Not if you’re making the wrong choices,” he replied in a clipped voice.

I both loved and hated his arrogant voice. The tone, the confidence, and the blunt, no-nonsense inflections in the deep baritone were uniquely Marcus Colter, but the things he said annoyed me to no end.

I yanked on my imprisoned hand again, but couldn’t free myself. Marcus had a tight grip on me, but he wasn’t hurting

me. “And who are you to decide if my choices are right or wrong?”

“They’re wrong,” he said flatly. “Let’s move.”

I had to either stumble along behind him or go face-first into the pavement. Since I was a survivor, I followed him.

I cursed myself for sharing so much with my brother, Jett. He’d obviously sent Marcus in his place since he disapproved of me seeing Becker. I hadn’t expected that, nor did I want it.

“Marcus, I have to go back,” I argued. “Greg will be at his bar any minute.”

“He owns that shithole?” he asked without slowing his pace.

“It’s not that bad,” I lied. “It’s a friendly, local place.”

“Yeah. Just one big happy family of criminals and hookers,” he rasped.

“Not everyone is born rich,” I shot back at him as I worked to keep pace with his long stride.

“No. They aren’t. But Becker is rich. The bastard doesn’t need you to meet with him there, and he could keep you out of his dishonest endeavors.”

I was silent for a moment before I replied, “What makes you think he’s dishonest?”

He slowed down a little as he turned his head toward me and grimaced. “Apparently, you’re the only one who *doesn’t* know he’s a crook, and a traitor to his own damn country.”

I ignored his accusations. “Stop. Please. I have to go back.”

“We’re getting the hell out of here, and then you’re going to tell me how exactly you two got together in the first place.”

“I can’t go with you.” I started struggling hard to free myself from Marcus. I twisted my arm, hoping he’d be forced to let go of my hand.

“Stop. You’ll injure yourself,” he demanded.

“I’m not going with you,” I argued.

“Yeah, you are,” he insisted.

A startled scream exited my mouth as Marcus bent over, lifted my body off the ground, and threw me over his shoulder.

I pounded on his back, fairly certain my ass was probably hanging out of the short skirt I was wearing. “Put me down,” I said, angry now that he was carrying me like a caveman.

His rock solid body bearing my weight effortlessly, he moved in long strides that ate up distance rapidly, ignoring my protests. The only thing I could see—unless I strained my neck—was the back of his suit jacket.

Dammit! This couldn’t happen. I *had* to be at the bar!

“Hello, George. We’re ready to go back to the penthouse,” I heard Marcus say to somebody I couldn’t see.

“Yes, sir,” the other man—obviously named George—replied, his voice not betraying a single iota of alarm that his boss had come back to the vehicle with a woman slung over his shoulder.

“Oooff!” The air was forced out of my lungs as my back landed against the soft leather of a car seat. My head was spinning as I tried to get my bearings, suddenly upright again after being carried upside down.

Marcus entered on the other side of the car, taking up the vacant space in the backseat beside me.

The vehicle was in motion before my head cleared.

“Dammit!” I cursed, pushing the hair back from my face as I straightened myself up in the seat. “Do you understand that you just pretty much kidnapped me?”

“You left me very little choice,” Marcus replied nonchalantly.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to calm my nerves. “You had a choice. You could have just left me alone. I’m a grown woman. I’ve traveled the world alone. I can make my own damn choices.”

I still couldn’t figure out why Marcus was even in Miami, and at Greg’s bar. The only reason I could come up with was my brother.

“Jett was concerned,” he confirmed.

I sighed. The last thing I wanted was for my youngest brother to be upset. Jett had been through so damn much, and he deserved a little bit of peace. “He doesn’t need to worry. I’m all grown up. I have been for years.”

“Why are you here, Danica? What happened to your career? You haven’t been outside of the US for months now,” he asked in a graveled voice.

I didn’t lie to him. “I needed a break. The places where I really needed to be—I just couldn’t go to right now.”

After what had happened to me, I’d needed some serious counseling, and I still wasn’t done going to therapy. I wasn’t able to go back to reporting in the Middle East without fear, and that had always been my beat. It was a fear I hadn’t been able to conquer, so I’d finally given the network my notice and struck out on my own to work as an independent journalist. My sister, Harper, thought I’d pushed too hard to go back to work, and maybe she was partly right, but my kidnapping had irrevocably changed me. I’d *never* be the same woman I was before I’d been taken as a hostage.

“You should take as much time off as you need. Nobody expected you to bounce back and be working again.”

“I wanted the distraction. I couldn’t stand being alone with my own thoughts,” I admitted. “But I couldn’t do it. I’m not the same person anymore, and I’m not quite sure who I am.”

Marcus spoke hoarsely in the dark interior of the vehicle. “You’re still the same, Dani. Inside, you haven’t changed. You’re just seeing the world around you differently.”

I leaned my head back against the headrest, wondering if what Marcus said was true. Maybe I hadn’t changed. Maybe he was right. Maybe I just couldn’t look at the world with the same innocence that I used to. “I hope so,” I answered wistfully.

“You aren’t going to find whatever you need with Gregory Becker,” he warned.

“I don’t know that yet,” I told him firmly. “I don’t even know him that well.”

“You don’t need to know him any better,” Marcus answered stiffly.

“You don’t understand,” I told him in a shaky voice.

“Then please enlighten me,” he suggested drily. “Because I can’t see the appeal of someone like him.” He hesitated before asking, “Did you fuck him?”

“What?” I wasn’t sure I’d heard him correctly.

“Did. You. Fuck. Him?” His voice was husky and grim.

“No!” The word shot out of my mouth without censoring my response. “Not that it’s any of your business who I sleep with,” I added.

“I’m making it my business.”

“Because of Jett,” I guessed.

“No. Because I risked lives to save your ass. I didn’t do it so you could throw that life away on a loser like Gregory Becker.”

“It’s *my* life,” I snapped at him. Marcus was making everything difficult.

“Break it off,” he commanded. “Do you really want to marry a man like him? Jesus, Dani, he’s a criminal. He just hasn’t gotten caught yet. But he will. And you’ll be caught in the middle of the entire mess, or dead because of his enemies. He doesn’t give a damn about you. If he did, he wouldn’t want you to wait in a bar filled with drunks and prostitutes.”

“I’m not marrying him,” I said angrily. “I’m just dating him. That’s all.”

“No more dates. No more meeting him at his bar. No more anything. Tell him you’ve lost interest and move on,” Marcus drawled.

“Stop!” I suddenly hollered at the driver. Surprisingly, he brought the limo to a halt.

“What are you doing, Danica?” Marcus reached over and grabbed my wrist.

I shook off his hold. “I’m home. My condo is in the building right behind us.”

“I didn’t know you had a place here.”

“I didn’t know you did, either,” I told him as I opened the car door. “But apparently you do.”

My neighborhood was well lit, but I still couldn’t see Marcus’s expression as he leaned over the backseat. “My place is close, so I’ll be around. This is a decent area. Just stay out of Becker’s turf.”

I closed the door without answering, and then scrambled to the stairs of my condo building as fast as my high stilettos would take me there.

Marcus didn’t get out of the car, but he didn’t leave until I’d made it past security and ducked into the building.

By the time I got to my condo and looked out the window, Marcus was gone.



Chapter 3



Marcus

“Since when does Danica have a condo here in Miami?” I asked Jett, using the speakerphone on my cell so my hands were free and I could yank off my tie.

The luxury penthouse I owned had walls of windows with spectacular beachside views when it was daylight. But since it was dark, there was every possibility that some neighbor could see me stripping down to my underwear, but I didn’t give a shit.

It was summer, and it was pretty damn hot and humid in Southern Florida. I wanted to get my dirty clothes off. I grudgingly admitted that I also needed to give my poor dick a break. I’d been rock-hard since the moment I’d seen Danica in that skimpy blouse and tight leather skirt. Unfortunately, I hadn’t been able to get that image out of my mind since she’d jumped out of my limo with her ass barely covered.

“Actually, she and Harper own the condo,” Jett informed me. “They both love the beach.”

I yanked my tie loose and dropped it on a chair. “She’s at her condo for now,” I said, starting on the buttons of my shirt. “But I’m not sure she’ll stay there. I just can’t figure out what’s so damn appealing about Becker.”

“I’m not sure,” Jett mused. “All I know is that Dani has been different since she came back from her kidnapping.”

“Different how?”

“This might sound weird, but she seems...sad. She used to be able to have more fun than any of us. Now I never even see her smile anymore.”

Come to think of it, I hadn't seen her smile, either. Granted, we'd both been working when we'd met up in the past, but that hadn't stopped her from smiling and laughing before. She'd always been feisty, but she seemed more like a shadow of that woman now. Not that she wasn't still sassy, but she had a harder edge. “She was going to be changed, Jett. You can't go through an experience like Danica did without coming away from the experience a changed person.”

I didn't tell him that Dani had already explained that she *felt* different, that she wasn't sure who she was anymore.

For some reason, that bothered me. Danica *was* the same person inside, but she seemed incredibly...wary. She looked at the world as a different, much scarier place. Although I understood why she felt that way, I detested the fact that she was no longer able to look at places and people with the same curiosity she used to have.

Even though she had a wickedly sharp mouth, the innocence she'd once had was gone, and I mourned the loss. It made me feel even more protective and determined to make sure she regained the sense of wonder that had been so much a part of her before.

“Maybe everything we've heard about Becker is just rumor,” Jett contemplated aloud. “What if he's actually a decent guy? I'd feel like a jerk if I tried to take somebody away from Dani who she cared about if the only thing he's guilty of is being the subject of rumors.”

With the buttons free, I yanked off my shirt and tossed it onto the same chair where my tie had landed.

What in the hell could I tell Jett? Nobody except my family knew that I worked as a special operative for the CIA. I *couldn't* explain that the agency had been trying to gather intel

on Becker for years, and that one day they'd get what they needed to put him away. He was the worst of the worst, a guy who got rich on making people into addicts and prostitutes, and it wasn't always by their choice. I was fairly certain the suspicion of Becker funding the terrorists was true. We just hadn't been able to find the intel that linked him, without doubt, to the rebels.

"No chance of that," I finally answered. "He's an asshole."

"I hate being fucking lame," Jett said in a frustrated tone. "I'd like to be there with you right now. But I have another minor surgery tomorrow. All this work to try to make me look presentable again. Hell, I know some of these marks will never heal, and I'll always probably limp when I'm tired."

I could almost hear his irritation through the phone connection, and as usual, I felt guilty as hell. "I wish I'd never brought you into PRO."

"I don't regret it, Marcus. We did a lot of good things, saved a lot of lives. And in the end, I didn't end up married to a woman who only wanted my money. But even *she* couldn't tolerate my injuries, even if it would make her wealthy as hell."

I flinched as I stepped out of my pants, tossed them on the chair, and then flopped onto a white leather couch, dressed only in a pair of boxer briefs. "You made a lucky escape from that one," I agreed. "But I feel like shit because I brought you into PRO. It was my operation."

Jett had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. When our helicopter had gone down, anybody who was on the side that bit the dust had some crush injuries from heavy equipment and other supplies falling on top of them. Jett had gotten the worst of it. He'd been on the wrong side *and* in the wrong area. I'd only suffered minor injuries, something I'd felt guilty as hell about seeing as a few on my team had been injured way

worse. The others had recovered, but Jett would never be quite the same, and that ate at me.

For some time, his internal injuries had been so bad that nobody knew if he would make it. When we realized he was going to live, we discovered it wasn't happening without challenges. They'd put my buddy and team member back together, but his leg would never be the same, and he had a lot of scarring.

"I wouldn't do it any differently, even if I could," Jett answered thoughtfully. "Besides, you needed me. I'm the best damn tech intel guy you could get."

I let out a bark of laughter—which was unusual for me—but I knew what he was saying was true. I owed many of PRO's successful missions to Jett. He was a damn genius when it came to Internet technology and programming.

I stood up and went to the fridge for a beer, screwing the top off as I answered, "You got me there. There's nobody better in the field."

"Damn right," Jett quipped.

"What are you working on now?" I asked curiously.

"Not much," he answered glumly. "Haven't had a lot of time. But the current projects for the company are progressing well."

Jett owned an enormous computer technology and cyber security company, and was doing a number of projects at any given time. Luckily, his profession was something he could manage at home in Seattle.

"Just worry about recovering," I told him. "I think you're rich enough."

"Not as loaded as you are," he protested. "But it's never been about the money for me anyway."

Jett's father and mother had died in a car accident, leaving all of their children with billions of dollars, much like what had happened to my father. "But you're doing what you love," I answered.

"Aren't you doing what you love, Marcus?"

I took a slug of my beer before I dropped back onto the sofa. I didn't mind running my father's multinational conglomerate, but I couldn't say it was really my passion. "I didn't have a lot of choice. Once my father died, I had to step up to the plate as soon as possible. I was the oldest."

Once we'd lost our dad, I'd felt compelled to take care of my father's legacy. Unfortunately, once I was old enough, dealing with my dad's conglomerate couldn't be accomplished without a hell of a lot of travel. We'd had management in place until I finished school, but the company hadn't been as solid as it had been when my father had been alive. So I'd traveled, making sure things were done the right way, handling all of the problems myself.

Except, sometimes I felt like by doing right with the company, I'd somehow lost track of my family. Having been gone so much, there were so many things I'd missed. Chloe had been in an abusive relationship, and I hadn't discovered it until after she was out of it. I'd slowly drifted away from my identical twin, Blake, who was now a US Senator. Tate and Zane had been through their own hardships, too, and once again, I hadn't been there for them very much.

Truth was, I missed them like hell, but because I'd been absent for so long, I wasn't sure how to be back in their lives again. Considering my work with the CIA, maybe it was for the best.

"Well, it's not like you don't have time to pursue anything you want to," Jett finally answered.

Right now, the only thing I wanted to *pursue* was his gorgeous, stubborn, redheaded sister. But I couldn't tell him

that.

“Yeah,” I agreed noncommittally. “I’ll hang out here for at least a few more days and keep an eye on Dani. I want to make sure she doesn’t cozy up to Becker again.”

Jett was quiet for a moment before he said, “You know, if she does, there isn’t much we can do, short of kidnapping her. I want to protect her, but she deserves her space. If she wants him, I can’t exactly stop her.”

“I *will* stop her,” I grumbled, purposely not mentioning I’d already technically kidnapped Danica. “She’d fuck up her entire life if she ends up with Becker. He’ll go down eventually.”

“You okay, Marcus?” Jett asked carefully.

“Yeah. Why?”

“I guess I’ve never really seen you take a personal matter this seriously.”

“Just trying to help,” I told him awkwardly.

He was right. Very rarely did I give much thought to personal stuff that didn’t involve my businesses or CIA intel.

She was my downfall when it came to being emotionally distant. Danica had been through so much, not to mention the fact that I had some kind of odd, animalistic possessiveness toward her that I couldn’t explain or understand. For a very long time, all I’d wanted was to get her naked, and then pin her against the wall while we both got our fill of each other. And I was pretty certain it would take me one hell of a long time to get rid of the primitive drive I harbored to make Danica mine. I wanted to fucking hear her scream that she belonged to me while I pounded into her tight, warm heat.

However, after she’d shared some of the pain she’d had to bear during her confinement with the rebels, I was driven to make sure she never suffered again.

“Let me know how it goes,” Jett requested. “And thanks, man. I owe you one.”

We ended our call, and I stood up, restless from being at loose ends for the first time I could remember. I’d asked one of my top executives to fill in on my travel for me, and I’d headed for Florida specifically to let Dani know that she couldn’t keep seeing Becker.

Something isn’t right. I can feel it.

My logical brain was telling me that there was no way she wanted Gregory Becker. Dani was too damn smart to end up with a man like him. Not only that, but she was a reporter, a woman who could read people extremely well.

Meanwhile, my irrational, primal, carnal response wanted to move Dani completely out of harm’s way immediately and completely.

I wish I could say that my logical mind was going to seek out answers, but I was afraid that for the first time in my life, I might very well be unable to completely ignore emotion.



Chapter 4



Dani

The following day, I'd had to make up an excuse for Greg as to why I wasn't at the bar to meet him.

I really wanted him to trust me, so letting him down like that wasn't exactly a step forward for our relationship.

Fortunately, he'd accepted the fact that I hadn't been feeling well and had fallen asleep. The really bad part was that he wanted to come over and see me here at my condo to make sure I was feeling better.

He thinks I'm sick. He probably won't stay long.

I'd dressed in a pretty, casual, yellow sundress, and then put on some makeup. I left my hair down in a sleek bob that barely touched my shoulders. Somehow, the style seemed to fit my natural redheaded color.

My phone rang, and I hurried to unplug the cell phone on the living room coffee table so I could answer before the caller got my voice mail. "Hello," I answered. I hadn't looked at the caller ID, so I was half expecting the call to be from Greg, saying he was going to be late or that he had to cancel his visit.

"Dani?" a panicked female voice asked in a nervous tone.

"Ruby? What's the matter? What happened?" I asked breathlessly.

I stressed out over my young friend on a daily basis. After a childhood and adolescence of abuse, she'd ended up running away and had landed in Miami at the age of eighteen. She'd

been here and homeless for almost four years, a fact I hadn't learned about until after she was picked up off the street right after we'd met a month or two ago. She had a home in a crappy hotel room now, but everything about the arrangement that had taken her off the streets worried me.

"The guy who rescued me says I owe him. This isn't what I thought it would be, Dani. They promised me I'd have a job, and that hasn't happened. Now they're telling me I owe money for the roof over my head and food. Since I don't have money to pay them back, they want to do some kind of auction thing for my services."

My stomach rolled as I thought about just what kind of auction Ruby was going to participate in. "Did they say what kind of auction?"

"T-They didn't s-say," she stammered. "But the woman who comes to bring me food asked if I was a virgin, and I admitted that I was. At first, I was thinking some kind of live-in housekeeper or something. But I'm starting to think they want me to sell my body since it's really all I have to give."

I breathed in deeply and then blew the air out. I had been pretty certain that whoever had picked her up had expected to somehow profit from helping Ruby. It was a situation ripe for human trafficking. "Did they say when?" I asked, trying not to sound as concerned as I felt.

"N-No. I think they want to put some weight on me first. Dani, I'm so scared. I know I have a place to stay and food to eat now, but I almost wish I was homeless again. I racked up debt with these people, and I have to pay them back."

God, I desperately wanted to move Ruby to my condo and make sure nobody harmed her ever again. But I had a few reasons why that wasn't possible at the moment. "Hang in there. I promise I'll get you out of there before anything happens."

"I got myself into a bad situation, didn't I?" she asked.

“Yes. But it’s not your fault. These people aren’t taking women and kids off the streets to help them. I think they’re human traffickers.” I shuddered at the thought of how many other women had been subject to their “kindness.”

“I don’t know what to do. They said if I try to leave without paying my debt, they’ll find me,” she whimpered.

“We’ll take care of it. Stay strong, Ruby. Ask them how much you owe.”

“Whatever it is, I can’t pay it without a job,” she answered flatly.

“I know you don’t know me that well, but can you trust me?” I questioned desperately.

Ruby hesitated for a moment before replying, “It’s hard for me to trust anybody,” she said honestly. “But I’ll try. You’ve already helped me a lot just by being a friend. I’m not as afraid now that I know that somebody knows and cares about me.”

“I’ll get you out,” I promised. “Just keep me updated on what’s happening when you safely can.”

“I will. Thank you.”

It broke my heart to hear her so sad and frightened. But she really had never had anything to be happy about. Her twenty-two years of life had been pretty damn harsh.

We ended our call, but my gut was still tied up in painful knots when I hung up the phone. Really, I’d been a wreck ever since I’d seen Marcus at Greg’s bar. Our encounter had been unsettling, especially when I realized that just seeing him again had reminded me of every wet dream I’d ever had about him.

And I’d had too many to count.

I’d been pretty confused and wounded after Marcus had rescued me, but the mysterious pull that drew me to him was just as present as it had been when he’d risked his ass to pull

me out of Syria. Honestly, I'd been drawn to him almost from the beginning of our acquaintance. The difficulty was, I now knew exactly what I was feeling. I was incredibly attracted to Marcus, and I had no idea how to stifle it.

The chemistry had always been there, but I hadn't been able to acknowledge the desire right after I'd escaped my kidnappers. But I'd had plenty of therapy to help me start to move on from that horrific experience, and I was able to admit that something about Marcus made me completely crazy. He was definitely hot, so wanting to have him pin me up against the wall and satisfy me wasn't surprising. I guess it was all the other emotions that seemed to get tangled up with my passionate desire to screw him that baffled me.

I admired what he'd been doing with PRO, even though my brother had been injured in one of the missions. Marcus always seemed to have everything under control in a way I'd never seen before. Granted, he'd gotten arrogant and bossy with me, but there was still some kind of nerves of steel that he seemed to carry along with him as easily as other men carried their cell phones. I'd seen him in plenty of hot spots, but he'd never seemed to be aware of the danger of being there. Hell, I wasn't sure I'd ever seen a wrinkle in his custom suit when he was doing business in all of the war-torn areas of the world where we'd collided.

I'd *had* to be in the scariest areas of the world for my job, but really, Marcus had never *had* to be in those places at all. Strangely, he just treated his travels like everyday work obligations, no matter where he happened to be.

"But what is he doing here in Miami?" I mumbled to myself as I sat on the arm of the couch to wait for Greg.

And why is he so concerned about who I'm dating?

Yeah, he said Jett was concerned, but Marcus wasn't the type of guy to be somewhere he didn't want to be.

Our entire encounter at Greg's bar had been baffling. I'd never seen Marcus in anything but work mode except during his dangerous rescue and the short time we'd spent together afterward. Acting like he was *personally* concerned was disconcerting.

I tried to shrug it off. It didn't matter if he liked Greg or not. He'd have to deal with the fact that I was dating somebody he didn't think was a good match for me. Nobody had ever interfered in my love life, and it wasn't happening now. My relationship with Greg was too important to me.

The doorbell finally rang, and I shook myself out of my negative thoughts to go answer the door.

"Hello, gorgeous," Greg drawled as I opened the door.

"Hi," I answered breathlessly.

He kissed me on the cheek and then walked into the living room as I closed the door.

"How are you feeling?" he questioned, making himself at home as he took a seat on the couch.

"Better," I replied, hoping he didn't grill me about not showing up at the bar for our date.

Greg was the type of man who was always cautious, always careful. He was attractive and fit, and had a nice, thick head of blond hair that would send most women running after him, even if he wasn't filthy rich. But there was a veil over his dark eyes that would never quite let anybody in.

My goal was to know him better than any woman ever had, and teach him to trust me. Unfortunately, me not showing at his bar—or so he thought—probably made him nervous. Greg was always watching for any kind of reaction or anything that didn't fit into his world exactly the way he thought it should. Me being absent last night shouldn't make him paranoid, but I'd already discovered that with Greg, any odd behavior was suspect.

“I’m glad,” he finally answered, his eyes raking over me like he wanted to see if I was telling the truth.

“Would you like a drink?” I asked politely.

“No, gorgeous. I just came to make sure you were...safe.”

I sat down on the couch next to him. We’d only been on a few dates, and attended a few charity events together. The most intimacy we’d experienced was a kiss at the door. “Maybe I was just tired,” I lied.

“I thought you were sick,” he said, sounding suspicious.

I shook my head. “I was, but maybe I just felt that way because I didn’t get enough sleep.”

He reached out and took my hand, squeezing it tighter than needed to show simple affection. “Then you should get some rest, Dani.”

“I will,” I replied, trying not to notice that my hand was losing circulation from his hold.

“I don’t really like the fact that you stood me up last night. But I’ll get over it,” he said in a warning voice, a tone that told me that I’d better never do it again.

“I’m really sorry,” I answered remorsefully.

“I’m powerful in this city, Dani. A man like me doesn’t have to wait.”

“I know,” I agreed.

Gregory *was* a force to be reckoned with in Miami. He was extremely rich, and donated money to politicians and law enforcement to keep them indebted to him. He didn’t have the power of a Lawson or a Colter, but his multimillionaire status made him a VIP in all of South Florida.

He stood up, pulling me to my feet because of his grip on my hand. “I’m glad you understand me,” he answered with a smirk.

“Are you leaving already?” I questioned, looking up at him with a tremulous smile.

“I have things to do,” he affirmed. “But I had to check on you.”

“Thank you,” I said.

He pulled me against him and dropped a kiss on my mouth before he answered, “I had to make sure you knew how I felt about not seeing you at my club last night.”

His emotions were pretty crystal-clear, actually. Greg was a control freak, and anything he couldn't make go his way wasn't acceptable.

“I won't let you down again,” I promised.

“That's good. Very good,” he answered as he finally let go of my hand. “Stay healthy, Dani. I want to see you in my bed as soon as you're feeling better.”

I wanted to shake my hand to return the circulation to my extremity, but I didn't.

His announcement about wanting to have sex with me wasn't a surprise. He'd made it perfectly clear when we'd met that he wanted me.

And I was pretty certain that up until last night, he'd always gotten what he wanted.

I followed him to the door and saw him out, leaning against the wood after I'd flipped the bolt.

“That didn't go exactly the way I'd hoped,” I whispered to myself as I blew out a breath that I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

Greg would never be a warm and fuzzy kind of guy. He had an extremely hard edge to him that should make me want to run away from him as quickly as possible. But I didn't because I really wanted to get close to him.

I straightened and pushed myself off the door, starting to feel as exhausted as I told Greg I'd been the night before.

“How do I get close to him when he never lets his guard down?” I mused aloud as I walked to the kitchen.

Greg hadn't told me when he wanted to meet again, but I knew there would be more dates, more time spent together, and I'd do everything in my power to try to be his confidant.

I refused to accept that our relationship would go any other way.



Chapter 5



Marcus

“Son of a bitch!” I cursed as I saw Gregory Becker leave Dani’s apartment.

I was sitting in the parking lot near Danica’s condo in my luxury rental car, doing surveillance. It was difficult for me to force myself not to go after the little weasel.

Had the bastard hurt Dani?

What was he doing at her place?

I’d spent plenty of time thinking about Dani and Becker together, but my gut still hurt every time I thought about Becker laying a hand on her.

Why in the fuck am I sitting in her parking lot alone, watching her condo?

I took a deep breath and let it out as I watched that dickhead Becker get into his presumptuous luxury sports car and leave. I couldn’t approach him. Not yet. I needed more information, which answered my question as to why I was watching Dani’s condo.

Somehow, I’d known that Becker would show up.

And I was, after all, a goddamn spy. Being patient and collecting information was what I did. And I was very good at doing that.

I just didn’t like it very much right now, especially not the *being patient* part of the task.

I didn't want to wait.

I wanted to confront the asshole right fucking now.

There was no question as to whether or not I was going to check up on Dani. If Becker had been at her place, I wanted to make sure she was safe. At least that was how I rationalized driving closer to her condo, getting out of my vehicle, and making my way to the entrance of her condo building.

There was minimal security at the entrance, and it wasn't difficult to gain entry by simply following another occupant through the door once they'd entered the code.

It hadn't been hard to get all the information on Dani that I'd wanted once I'd requested a file on her from DC. And yeah, I'd rationalized *that* action too, telling myself I needed her address and any other recent information I could get because she was dating somebody who was on the radar of the federal government. Hell, I'd been sent a loaded file of information, but none of it was all that relevant to her current status as Becker's love interest.

I grimaced as I rang her doorbell, the thought of Becker so much as touching a hair on Dani's head making my gut churn.

She's one of my best friend's sisters. It isn't abnormal for me to be concerned.

Really, I pretty much knew that excuse was bullshit, but I let it roll off my back. Danica Lawson was off-limits, even if I did get hard every time I saw her. She always had been. Dani *was* Jett's sister, and I absolutely couldn't just nail her without everything becoming complicated. And I hated complications. Now that I had my priorities straight, I was determined to keep a level head.

"What are you doing here?" Dani asked, her voice disapproving as she stared at me from the door she'd just opened.

Christ! Didn't she bother to ask who was ringing her doorbell before she just opened the door that way? "You never answered all my questions," I replied, inviting myself into her home as I brushed past her.

"I don't need to explain myself to you," she said huffily before she closed the door, turned toward me and then crossed her arms stubbornly. "You need to leave. I doubt that Greg is always watching me, but I don't want him to know you were here."

"Do you do everything he tells you to do?" I remarked as calmly as possible. "Doesn't it concern you even a little bit that you aren't sure whether or not some guy is watching you?"

Hell, it worried *me* that Danica might be in deep enough with Gregory Becker that he might have put somebody on her to watch her every move. She should be terrified.

"No. It doesn't bother me." She eyed me suspiciously as she added, "I see you lost the custom suit today."

"It's Saturday," I answered. "I don't wear a suit on the weekends."

She snorted. "It's good to know you lighten up two days out of the week."

I frowned at her. "I don't ever *lighten up*. I just dress more relaxed."

Danica looked beautiful in a casual yellow dress that made her hair appear to be a deeper red. And if I appeared more lax than usual, it was because of my father. He'd always tried to be with his kids on the weekends, and he lost the suit on Saturday and Sunday when he was home, and tried to just be our dad. For some reason, I always followed his example, even though I didn't have anybody who cared what I wore. But it made me somehow feel like I was following in his footsteps when I wore jeans and a casual shirt when it wasn't a workday.

My weekend attire did make it difficult to pack a gun. But I managed.

“It’s a good look on you,” she answered as she moved closer, and looked up at me with an irritated expression. “But what *are* you doing here, Marcus? I still haven’t forgotten the fact that you literally hauled me away from a date.”

“Get over it,” I suggested. “Since you’re affiliating with somebody who is possibly guilty of international crimes, you needed to be taken away from trouble.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gregory Becker has been rumored for years to be into some unsavory ways of making money. It isn’t a secret in the business world.”

“They’re just rumors,” she said defensively.

“Behind every rumor is a grain of truth,” I warned. “You know that. How did you ever get tangled up with somebody like him? And what happened to your job as an international correspondent?”

Her eyes left my face as she turned around and sat on the arm of her couch. “I told you I needed a break. I lost my edge,” she admitted hesitantly. “I worked around Europe and other countries, but I never could manage to go back to the Middle East without panicking. I decided to leave my network.”

I saw a look of vulnerability flash across her face. Generally, I could find a way to use that moment of weakness to my advantage, but I didn’t have the stomach for it with Danica. “That’s understandable after what happened to you.”

She shook her head. “As a reporter, I couldn’t afford to be afraid. My neurosis could endanger my whole crew. But I wasn’t fearless anymore. I haven’t been the same since...the incident.”

Dani had reason to want to stay as far away from the location of her kidnapping as possible. She wouldn't be human if she *wasn't* wary. "You could have stayed on as European correspondence."

"I needed something different," she said, her eyes trained away from mine. "I just wanted some time."

"Then take all the time you need. It was madness to go back so soon after what happened." I hesitated before asking, "What part of the hostage situation is still haunting you?"

I wasn't sure I could deal with her answer without wanting the bastards who'd kidnapped her to be alive again so I could snuff them out myself. Oh yeah, Dani had talked to me, but I had a feeling she was leaving out a very large chunk of what had happened to her.

"What does it matter?" she asked. "It's not like they'll ever serve time or pay for what happened to me."

"They can't be because they're all dead," I informed her flatly. She already knew that, but I felt compelled to remind her that none of the rebels would ever bother her again. Personally, I felt like instant death was something they hadn't deserved.

Her head jerked back toward me, and her expression was solemn. "Logically, I understand that, but my brain isn't always reasonable, Marcus. How did you ever get that information? You never told me how you knew. The information should have been classified."

I could hardly tell her that I had quite a lot of intel from the government. Nobody knew about my involvement with the CIA and intelligence gathering except my family. Not even her brother, Jett. My PRO team had only known that I was skilled in private rescue operations. "I overheard a conversation about it," I lied smoothly because I was accustomed to twisting the truth.

Her expression changed as tears began to flow down her cheeks. “Is it terrible to say that I’m glad they’re all dead?” she questioned, her body visibly shaking.

“Of course not,” I said. “After what happened, you should be glad they’re off the face of the earth.”

I watched helplessly as tears continued to flow down her cheeks. Both of us had seen horrendous atrocities that shouldn’t be occurring in the modern world, but her experience had been fucking personal.

“What haunts you the most?” I asked insistently, wanting to help her kill off those ghosts.

She swiped the tears from her face and then turned her gorgeous turquoise eyes on me. There was a burning anger in her expression that would probably make the strongest person flinch, but I refused to back down.

“Can’t we just let it go?” she snapped. “Because I really want to forget it, but I relive it over and over in my nightmares. I’ve been in counseling ever since it happened, and I still can’t stop dreaming about it. I’ve dealt with the emotional trauma as much as I’m able to right now, but there are still times when I can’t stop myself from remembering how I had wished they’d just kill me so I didn’t have to endure another minute of pain or another minute of them using my body.”

She was breathless by the time she’d finished, and I stared angrily at her tiny, vulnerable figure, and troubled eyes. I wasn’t pissed at her for what she’d said. Dani had every right to hate talking about her experience. I was enraged by the unfairness of what she’d endured.

Dammit! Maybe I *had* once said she’d known the risks of her job. But that didn’t mean I’d ever *wanted* her to suffer. “I’m sorry,” I said in a husky voice. “I didn’t mean to bring up something that hurts to talk about.”

“It doesn’t hurt anymore,” she answered. “It majorly pisses me off. I want to move on. But my fear paralyzes me sometimes. I think I’m over what happened, and it comes back in my damn dreams. I lost my skills and a job that I loved because I just can’t seem to pretend it never happened.”

“It will eventually fade, but I’m not sure you ever completely get over an experience like that,” I informed her grimly.

“Obviously I haven’t,” she said in a tremulous voice. “Not entirely.”

Christ! I felt like I was experiencing her pain. My heart was racing, and I did all I could do not to carry her away again, and put her in a place where she’d never be harmed again. There was an unfamiliar ache in my chest for everything she’d been through. I felt like I was having a damn heart attack.

I can’t stand to ever see her hurting again.

“Give up on Becker,” I insisted. “He’ll bring you nothing but more pain.”

Her angry gaze met my stubborn one. “I can’t. I won’t,” she answered determinedly. “He’s the only thing that keeps me grounded and busy right now.”

Unexpectedly, my temper flared. “Dating a criminal is *not* helping you.”

“You have no idea what I need right now. You come here with nothing but rumors about a man who appears to care about me. Nobody has ever found any solid evidence that Greg committed *any* crimes.”

Oh, I’d find evidence. It was just a matter of time. In the meantime, I didn’t want Dani anywhere near the investigations. “He’s on everybody’s watch list. For God’s sake, do you want to get tangled up in that?”

She stood. “If I have to, I will.” She stormed to the door and opened it. “Now please leave. I’ve dealt with all I can

handle today.”

I was furious, but nothing I could say would help her right now. I hesitated as I reached the door. “Do you actually love him?”

“I never said I loved him, but I need him right now,” she retorted.

The last thing I wanted to hear was that she thought she needed Becker. She didn’t. But maybe she was confused. “I’m not letting him take you down with him,” I growled as I stepped out the door.

She didn’t answer.

The door slammed closed right behind me.



Chapter 6



Dani

“Marcus drives me crazy, Harper. I don’t understand why he’s even here,” I confided to my sister on the phone the next day.

Harper was the only person who really understood how I felt. I’d finally broken down and told her everything about what had happened to me while I was in captivity, right after I’d resigned from my network.

“Maybe he’s right, Dani. Maybe you shouldn’t be mixed up in any of this. Maybe dating Gregory Becker isn’t a good idea,” she answered in a concerned tone.

I flopped onto the sofa in the condo. My sister was an architect, but she operated far outside of corporations. And her husband was a US Senator. So she’d probably never heard any of the rumors that I knew circulated in the world of big business. “You’re starting to sound just like Marcus,” I told her in a disgusted voice.

“Marcus has been in the business world since he became an adult. If he’s heard that this guy is bad news, I’m sure he knows something. He certainly isn’t the type to overexaggerate.”

“I’m not going to stop seeing Greg,” I informed her stubbornly. “Do you know why Marcus is here?”

“I don’t,” she admitted. “But Blake mentioned that Marcus has real estate all over the world, so I’m not surprised that he owns property there.”

Honestly, I wasn't surprised, either. I just wished he'd go spend time somewhere else. I found his presence unnerving when I was trying to establish a relationship. Especially when he was dragging me away from my dates. "I'm hoping he leaves soon."

"Don't bet on that," Harper warned. "He's obviously trying to protect you, and from what Blake has told me, he can be pretty stubborn."

"Why would he even care?" I asked desperately. "I barely know him. He *did* save my life, but it's not like we've kept in touch."

Truthfully, Marcus had been supportive when I'd shared some of what had happened to me during our long flight from Turkey to the US. Granted, I hadn't shared every single detail, but what I had confessed to him had been difficult to share. But I'd poured enough of my heart out to him that I couldn't quite seem to look at him as just an acquaintance. That description didn't quite fit. He'd ended up staying with me until I was finally exhausted and fell asleep on the bed in his private jet. When I woke up, we'd been landing in DC. But then, I couldn't honestly say Marcus was a *friend*, either. We hadn't seen each other since we'd parted ways in Washington.

"He's protective of his family," Harper answered. "And you're family to him now. I'm married to his twin brother."

"That's kind of a stretch," I replied. "I'm the sister of his sister-in-law."

"Obviously, that's close enough for him to be concerned." Harper sighed before she continued. "Despite his rather irritating arrogance, he's a good man, Dani. He lost his father when he was little more than a boy, and Blake says he's always felt like it was *his* responsibility to pick up the mantle for his father. His childhood was pretty much lost. He and Blake started to grow apart after their father died. Marcus went

to college and then traveled most of the time. It's only recently that they've started to build their relationship again."

Even though I was angry at Marcus, I felt a twitch of pain in my heart for the young man who had lost his father way too early. I could see Marcus trying to fill the void in the family. And he was the only one who had continued his father's legacy in international business. "Are the two of them close again?" I asked curiously.

"It's better than it used to be. But Marcus still keeps to himself way too much. Even Blake isn't privy to what he's thinking most of the time."

"I hope Blake has a better sense of humor than Marcus," I commented. "I'm not sure I've ever seen Marcus crack a smile."

I hadn't seen a lot of my sister and Blake. We'd talked at Harper's wedding, but it had been chaotic with all of the family around. After they'd married, I'd gone back to traveling in Europe for my job. I hadn't been back to Rocky Springs since I'd left my network. I'd come directly to Miami.

"Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen Marcus smile, either," Harper observed. "And Blake has a wonderful sense of humor. I think he's taught me how to have fun again."

I sighed. I wished I could remember what it was like to laugh. Honestly, I'd been pretty damn glum for months. "I'm glad," I said sincerely.

Harper deserved to be happy. My sister did so much for other people. Since she had tons of money like every other Lawson, she didn't have to work for a living. But she spent most of her time building homeless shelters around the country to help make a difference in the world.

At one time, I thought I'd been making my own mark on the planet. I let the world know about the atrocities that were happening in other countries and at home—up close and personal. Most of the reporting was pretty brutal, and I did it

to bring awareness of what was happening in places most people probably rarely thought about.

Once...that had been important to me, more critical than my own safety. But after my experience in Syria, I couldn't do my job the same way anymore, and I hated it.

"Are you okay?" Harper asked in a kind tone.

"As okay as I *can* be, seeing as I quit my job," I answered honestly.

"How's the therapy going?"

"It's good. I still have flashbacks and nightmares, but otherwise I'm okay. I think I just need time."

"I worry about you. I wish you'd come for a long visit here in Colorado. Come stay with me. I'll be home for a few months. The Senate is out of session."

Although we'd grown up close to the Colters, we didn't have a home there anymore. After my parents had been killed in a traffic accident, we'd sold our childhood home. None of the brothers, me, or Harper could stand the pain of staying in our old home. There were too many memories and reminders that we'd lost our parents way too soon.

"I'll get there as soon as I can," I answered noncommittally. Right now, I didn't want to make any promises. I wasn't sure what was going to happen with Greg. "You could always feel free to come visit the condo that we bought but you never see," I teased.

I had used Miami as my home base most of the time when I was actually in the States. Either that, or I'd crashed at Harper's place in California, a home that she'd now sold to live full-time with her husband in Rocky Springs.

"I've seen the Miami condo," Harper argued. "I just don't spend as much time there as you do."

“It would be a comfortable flight on your husband’s private jet,” I pointed out.

Harper sighed. “I’d love to come there, but I don’t get as much time with Blake as I’d like, and he’s home until the Senate is back in session. I kind of miss the ocean. When we were growing up, I never missed the water. But now the lack of water is the only thing I don’t like about Colorado. What people consider lakes here are actually ponds.”

I smiled because I knew exactly what she meant. “Well, the ocean is here waiting for you when you’re ready.”

“I’ll get there eventually, especially if you’re still there. I need to meet this boyfriend of yours.”

“Greg isn’t exactly my boyfriend,” I denied. “Not at the moment, anyway.”

“He’s still seeing other people?” Harper asked, sounding confused.

Actually, I was pretty sure Greg was still *fucking* other people. He wasn’t really the faithful type. “Yes.”

“Are you?” Harper questioned.

I hesitated, wondering if being so damn attracted to her husband’s twin brother would count as some kind of infidelity. “I’m not seeing anybody else.”

“If he hasn’t seen you for the treasure you are, then maybe he isn’t good enough for you,” Harper said thoughtfully. “Are you certain that Marcus isn’t right about this guy?”

I rolled my eyes. “Marcus isn’t right about everything, and he has no business getting involved in who I date, Harper. It’s annoying.”

“I think that maybe you like Marcus,” she answered. “You spent a lot of time with him while you were recovering. You said he was nice to you.”

“I *don't* like him,” I insisted. “And he was nice to me then. But he cheats at playing chess,” I grumbled.

Harper laughed out loud. “How do you cheat at chess? Oh my God, did he actually beat you?”

“I think he switched pieces around when I wasn't looking,” I informed her, knowing I was fibbing. Marcus had won fair and square, but I was kind of a sore loser when it came to chess games.

“He *did* win!” Harper exclaimed, sounding delighted.

“Don't sound so happy about it.”

“You need a man who will challenge you once in a while,” she declared. “You're too intelligent to date an ignorant male.”

“Speaking of perfect men, how is Blake?” I asked, needing to change the subject. I pretty much told Harper everything, but because Marcus was her brother-in-law, I didn't feel comfortable spilling my guts about how much Marcus confused me.

“He's amazing,” Harper said with a happy sigh. “Sometimes it's hard to believe that he's back in my life, and I'm married to him.”

“Believe it. I was your maid of honor. I saw it happen.”

“I know. But it still seems surreal. I just wish you and our brothers could find the same kind of happiness. Mason has gotten so cynical, and I'm worried about Jett after what happened with Lisette.”

“I'd still like to bitch slap her,” I confessed. “How do you dump a guy you love just because he had an accident and has a few scars and a limp? The accident hasn't changed who he is inside.”

“She didn't love him. I'm glad she's out of his life,” Harper admitted. “Jett is too good for her. There was nothing he wouldn't do to make her happy, and she treated him like dirt.”

“Have you heard from him?” I asked, wondering how my youngest brother was getting along. “I haven’t heard from him for a few days.”

“He had to have another minor operation. But I talked to him yesterday, and he sounds okay.”

Harper and I caught up on the rest of the family, finally hanging up because we both had things to do.

I went to the kitchen to put my phone on *charge*. I’d just connected it when it began to ring.

I checked the caller ID, my heart beginning to speed up as I saw that Greg was the caller. A surge of adrenaline shot through my body, a familiar feeling because I experienced it every time I talked to or saw Gregory Becker.

I took a deep breath and let it out to calm down before I finally answered the phone.



Chapter 7



Marcus

It hadn't been difficult to get tickets to the charity event being held in Miami Beach at some fancy club I'd never been to before. All I'd had to do was cough up the required money for a ticket, and I gained my entrance into the exclusive gathering, the place where Gregory Becker would come through the door momentarily with his *date*. I wasn't interested in *him* at the moment. I was here because Danica was apparently coming here with him tonight.

Obviously, she wasn't prepared to listen to my advice, so I was going to have to be more assertive and clear about her staying away from Becker.

Goddammit! Why did she have to be so damn stubborn? What hold did Becker have over her? I refused to acknowledge that she might actually *like* the asshole.

I looked around the ballroom, a venue that was rapidly filling up with guests. I'd grabbed a table that gave me a perfect view of the only entrance to the room, and I'd already tossed back more than one glass of Scotch while I'd been waiting.

George had driven me here, and he'd be waiting for me whenever I left, which I hoped would be soon. The large space was air conditioned, but the humidity was ruthless, and my tuxedo was starting to become uncomfortable as the place started to get overcrowded with guests.

Yeah, I'd attended plenty of these events, but I wasn't usually attending because I was pissed at a hot redhead who

wouldn't listen to my warnings. I generally had a reason to come to a formal affair. Otherwise, I just sent a check to my charities and they were perfectly happy.

My blood pressure rose as Becker finally strolled through the door, looking just as pretentious as he had the few times we'd met in the past. But my hypertension was being caused by the woman he was manhandling, his arms around Danica's waist like he fucking owned her.

If anybody owns her, it's me!

My random thought startled the hell out of me. I wasn't a possessive kind of guy, and I'd *never* wanted a woman all to myself. Sure, I had my share of liaisons with women. My sexual appetite had always been healthy. Well, it *had* been *before* I went and kissed an angel who made me feel all kinds of bizarre emotions I'd never experienced before.

Really, I didn't want to *own* her, right? That was just sick and twisted.

Maybe *own* wasn't a good word, because I had no desire to control her other than moving her away from danger. *Okay. Yeah. I didn't want another man touching her either.*

After watching Dani for a few more seconds, I decided I *was* definitely sick and twisted when it came to her. The desire to punch Becker out and drag Dani away from him was still as strong as it had been when they'd walked through the door. Maybe worse!

It didn't help as my eyes roamed over Dani's form. I knew her well enough to recognize that her appearance wasn't really her usual style. The black dress she was wearing was a formal, but it had a figure-hugging design, and the hem landed well above her knees. Once again, she was wearing a ridiculously high pair of stiletto heels that were black, and I had to pull my mind out of the gutter as I wondered what kind of lingerie she was wearing under that cock teaser of a dress.

Her hair was in a sleek bob, the black dress enhancing the red of those bouncy strands. I had *no* idea what was up with the heavy makeup she was wearing. From what I'd observed, she didn't seem like the type to layer makeup onto her skin. She certainly didn't need it to be fuckable. Really, all she needed to do was breathe and my dick was hard. I was pretty sure any guy with a healthy sex drive would feel the same way.

I motioned for a waiter to bring me another Scotch. I desperately needed it now that I'd seen Dani with Becker.

I watched as the couple progressed around the room, Dani quietly staying by Becker's side, the expression on her face not quite what I'd expect from a woman who was excited to be with her date. Her smile was weak and unnatural, and her demeanor was submissive, something I knew damn well wasn't normal.

The event was crowded and she'd never noticed my presence, which was just what I'd wanted. I'd situated myself that way purposely. I could watch her, but she wasn't seeing me.

Over the last year, I'd become damn good at stalking her undetected, which was something I wasn't exactly proud of, but I'd accepted the fact that I couldn't lose the overwhelming desire to protect her. The tendency was much too strong—even for me—to stuff back down and ignore.

Eventually, they moved to the bar. Becker shoved some pink and fluffy drink at Dani, and he accepted what I assumed was some kind of gin from the bartender.

It seemed like Becker was doing all the talking, because she was just nodding obligingly back at him with the same false smile.

Finally, she put her drink on the bar and then headed off alone. It was the moment I'd waited for and I discreetly followed her.

Because I'd been watching women coming in and out of the restroom, I had to wait for the last female I'd seen go in to exit again before I entered.

Dani was drying her hands by the time I plowed through the door.

She took a superficial look at me. But within a blink of an eye, her gaze snapped back to me again with astonishment. "Marcus? What in the hell are you doing here? And you *can't* be in *here*. It's the *ladies'* room."

I didn't care *where* we were. Everyone was out of the restroom, and I needed to talk to her. I crossed my arms as I leaned against the counter. She wasn't going anywhere. "There's nobody else in here. Why are you with him, Danica? I warned you about Becker. I'm not here for no reason. He's dangerous."

"And I remember telling you that I wasn't about to heed your warning, Marcus," she answered tightly.

She tried to duck around me after she dried her hands, but failed miserably.

I moved to block her exit. "What is it with you and Becker? Does he have some kind of control over you? Because I sure as hell don't believe you're enjoying yourself."

She shrugged. "He's hot. He's rich. Plenty of women want to be with him."

My calm resolve was beginning to waver. I pinned her against the granite vanity where the sinks were located, preventing her escape. "That's bullshit, Dani, and we both know it." I swiped my hand against her cheek. "How many layers of makeup are you wearing?"

"Greg likes me to wear it like this," she protested, pushing against my chest. "And it doesn't matter to me."

"What in the hell do you need from him that you aren't getting? What is he doing for you? You told me you weren't

sleeping with him.”

“I’m not. But maybe I *want* to be with him,” she answered angrily. “What in the hell does it matter to you?”

My ability to think rationally was challenged, and I was so incensed at the idea that she might want to sleep with Becker that I threaded a hand through that sleek, sexy red hair and lowered my head, my mouth crashing down on hers.

I wasn’t gentle with her, but I *could* be. Dammit! She belonged in my bed and not Becker’s. *Never* Becker’s! I’d give her whatever the hell she needed to get away from that asshole.

I *felt* the exact moment she gave in to the kiss, her body melting against mine and her arms twining around my neck.

Any sense of reason I had was gone as I lifted my head, my breath sawing in and out of my lungs like I’d just run a marathon. *Fuck!* I could *not* resist this woman for some unknown reason. I wanted to claim her as mine, but I sure as hell couldn’t do it here.

My hands stroked down her back and landed on her shapely ass. I kissed the sensitive skin of her neck as I lifted her short skirt in a damn frenzy.

My cock was rock-hard as I realized she was wearing very little under her dress. Just a tiny pair of panties and a garter belt to hold up those sheer stockings.

Her breathless moan of pure desire almost made me come undone as my hand moved between her thighs, where my fingers met her silken heat below her barely there panties.

“Does he make you feel *this*, Danica?” I asked demanding, watching her head fall back as I stroked through her wet folds and teased the tiny bundle of nerves that was practically begging to be touched.

“Marcus. Somebody could come in here,” she said, panting.

The throaty, needy tone of her voice as she said my name made my cock throb painfully.

I ignored it. *This wasn't about me...*

However, she *was* right about being too exposed, so I quickly yanked her into one of the stalls and closed the door. The upscale bathroom cubicle provided full enclosure except for overhead. It offered more privacy, yet I'd still be able to hear if somebody entered.

Dani's back was against the wooden wall, her expression raw and confused.

I stroked her cheek. "Does that turn you on, Dani? The thought that you might get caught while you come?"

She was adventurous. I knew that. And I honestly didn't give a damn if she was screaming my name when somebody entered. Hell, I'd welcome anybody who would know that she was *mine*.

"No, that's crazy," she said tremulously.

"Is it?" I asked, my fingers on her pussy again.

Her head slammed back against the wood, but she didn't seem to notice. "Oh, God. Why are you doing this?"

"Because I want you as much as you want me, Danica. I don't want Becker touching you. I want it to be *me* who makes you come every damn time," I rasped against the side of her neck.

My touch was firm on her clit, but not enough to send her over the edge. I was enjoying watching her pleasure too much for this to be over quickly.

"Why? Why me?" Her voice was quivering with raw passion.

"I have no fucking idea, but I really don't care anymore," I answered in a grveled voice.

I watched as she sagged against the wall, totally lost in the need to find her climax, her hips pushing against my hand frantically.

Jesus! She was fucking gorgeous when her face was relaxed, her beautiful eyes filled with need.

At some other place, I'd taste her, feast on her, and then fuck her until she became completely undone. But I didn't lose track of exactly where we were and the limitations that presented.

Regardless of the way she talked, I was fairly certain that she hadn't been with anybody since I'd kissed her. I knew what she'd been through at the hands of the terrorists. And it was going to take a guy who understood what she needed. And that man was going to be *me*.

I heard the bathroom door open, and I put a finger over her lips. I stroked over her clit faster, adding the pressure she was craving.

"Yes," she whispered, aware that somebody had come into the restroom, but unable to hold everything back.

I put my mouth close to her ear and whispered in a husky tone, "Come for me, Dani."

Her eyes closed and she bit her bottom lip, desperately trying to be quiet.

I used that moment to thrust my finger into her slick sheath, almost groaning myself at how tight, wet, and inviting that channel was as I added a second finger and thrust into her while my thumb still teased her clit.

One hand was on her ass, stroking over her exposed butt cheeks because she was wearing some sexy thong panties.

"Marcus!" she whispered urgently. "I can't."

"Oh yes, you can," I told her in a hoarse, low tone.

Her head thrashed, and I felt her body begin to tremble, so very close to release.

When she opened her mouth and her body tightened, I slammed my lips down hard over hers, swallowing her scream as her orgasm tore through her body. My hand on her ass supported her as her legs appeared to give way. I lifted my mouth and kissed her temple, my hand reaching back to lower the toilet seat before I helped her sit down on top of it.

She was gasping for breath as I removed a clean handkerchief from the pocket of my tux, crouched down, and gently wiped the sweat from her face.

I'd heard the water running out at the sink, and the guest left the bathroom, leaving us alone again. At least for now.

"Are you okay?" I asked, concerned that I'd pushed her too hard.

She wasn't afraid of me anymore, nor was she frightened of her own sexuality. Knowing that she'd been aroused without thinking about what had happened to her at the hands of her captives told me just how far she'd come with therapy.

She shook her head and then took the handkerchief from my hand to pat down her neck and face. "I don't know what happened to me," she confessed, still looking shaken.

"You came," I offered helpfully.

"It doesn't happen for me like that."

"Maybe it's what you need, Dani. And you aren't going to get it from Becker," I grumbled.

She stood up suddenly, forcing me to straighten up along with her. "Oh, God," she said anxiously. "Greg. He's going to be so mad. I've been in here too long."

I grabbed her arms and shook her lightly. "You can't keep dancing to his tune, Danica," I rumbled, angry about her concerned response.

“I have to,” she said in a desperate voice. “I need him to trust me.”

“Fuck no, you don’t,” I said to her forcefully. “You don’t need his sorry ass at all.”

“You don’t understand,” she said in a pleading voice. “I have to go back.”

“Not happening,” I answered. “Not until I have some answers. Christ! I just got you off, Dani. And you want to run back to Becker?” I was about ready to lose it.

“I need to get back to the party,” she answered, trying to claw her way out of the stall.

I let her go because I couldn’t stand to see her so terrified. Not after what she’d been through.

She sprinted to the mirror and tried to quickly fix her makeup and hair.

Finally, I said, “Go. Go back to him. But I’ll be watching. You don’t love him. Hell, I don’t think you even enjoy being with him.” I’d seen the way she looked at Becker, and it certainly wasn’t how she’d looked at me with desperate passion in her eyes, her expression begging me to make her come.

I slammed out of the restroom, more furious than I’d been when I’d first come in to find Dani. *Jesus!* The woman was going to give me a damn heart attack. I slid into my seat at the table, my dick still as hard as granite.

Dani exited a few minutes later, her eyes searching for and finding Becker not far beyond where I was sitting.

It took everything I had not to block her way as her sexy ass got closer and closer, but to my surprise, she stopped at my table. She was watching Becker, but his back was to both of us.

Without missing a beat, she swiped my Scotch from my table and downed it in two big gulps and then set it back down on the pristine white tablecloth.

“I hate pink, fluffy drinks,” she mumbled and then moved on toward her date.

I smirked. I had to admire a woman who could knock back a good whiskey without flinching.

My eyes never leaving Dani, I signaled the waiter for a refill.



Chapter 8



Dani

Greg was angry.

I'd known it from the moment he'd given me "the look" after I got back from the restroom at the charity event.

I'd stayed away from him way too long, and once I'd returned to his side, I was distracted.

Okay, I was *way* distracted.

It hadn't been easy standing with my date when I knew the guy who had given me a mind-blowing orgasm only moments before was staring a hole in my back.

What in the hell had gotten into me in the restroom? I'd lost complete control of myself and wallowed in the pleasure that Marcus had given me.

My body had craved Marcus's touch so desperately that I hadn't even thought about my date. My senses had been battered, and all I'd been able to do was ride a wave of heat so staggering that I was pretty sure I'd come away a little more than singed.

I'd never quite recovered from that volatile orgasm, and now that Greg and I had returned to my condo, I knew he was going to vent some of his anger.

"What in the hell was tonight about?" Greg asked angrily as I closed the door of my condo behind us after we'd entered.

Well, that hadn't taken very long.

“Would you like a drink?” I asked politely as I moved by him and into the kitchen.

He followed me. “No, I don’t want a goddamn drink. I want you to tell me why you were gone so long to the bathroom. How long does it take to piss? I felt like you were with somebody else tonight, because you sure as hell didn’t hear a word I said to you.”

I turned back to look at him, noticing that his eyes were sparking with anger. “I was there. What else do you want from me? I’ve never been fond of fancy fundraisers.”

I always gave my money readily enough, but I preferred to do it in private. I didn’t need public adoration for donating money to a good cause the way Greg seemed to crave it.

He grabbed my hair and jerked my head back. “I want everything you have,” he said bitterly. “I don’t want your mind somewhere else when I’m speaking to you.”

“Greg, that hurts,” I said firmly, trying to pull back.

“I don’t give a shit if it hurts. I want it to hurt. Maybe you’ll remember who you answer to and who you’re with.”

His venomous stare was starting to scare me, but I didn’t want him to know.

“Let. Go. Of. Me.” I tried not to let him see me sweat.

Thankfully, his painful grip on my hair finally released, but I wasn’t expecting the powerful backhanded blow he let fly on my face.

My cheek felt like it exploded, and my head jerked to one side. Tears filled my eyes from the pain. He hadn’t held back. He’d let go full force.

My hand flew to my face, as I took a step back. “Why did you do that?”

He sneered. “Because I can,” he answered darkly. “I’m your goddamn master, Dani. Haven’t you figured that out by

now? I'm in charge of any woman I date."

"I wore what you wanted. I did what you wanted," I reminded him.

"But I didn't have your complete attention. Do I have it now?"

I looked at him and nodded because I didn't think I could handle another blow like the one I'd just taken.

"Good," he answered smugly. "I think it's time I fucked you. Past time. Be at my house next Friday night, and wear something sexy."

I swallowed hard and kept silent as he moved forward and stroked a hand down my injured cheek. "I didn't want to have to do that to you," he said in an eerily calm voice. "You made me do it. I can't lose control of anything, especially my women. I don't share, Dani. I'll never share."

I couldn't very well say that he didn't have to share. Truth was, all I'd thought about all night was Marcus.

His fingers pushed sadistically on my throbbing cheekbone. "That will leave my mark," he mused. "I like it. Your face will be black and blue by my hand."

Jesus! I was hoping that was enough. I'd suffered through worse beatings at the hands of the terrorists. Much worse. But it was so much harder dealing with abuse from somebody when I wasn't a captive.

I let out a silent breath of relief as he turned and walked toward the door. "Next Friday. Be there or I'll come and find you, and it won't be pleasant for you," he threatened.

"I'll be there. What time?"

He seemed to consider my question for a moment before he answered. "Eight o'clock. Be on time, and plan on spending the night. My girls aren't usually capable of leaving after I'm done with them. I like it rough. *Very* rough."

I inwardly cringed, but outwardly showed no reaction to his comment. I was pretty sure he handled his women in bed the same way he did out of the sack.

I slowly followed him to the door and then opened it for him. "I'll see you then," I muttered.

He shot me a look totally devoid of emotion. "Don't disappoint me. I hate being disappointed."

"I won't," I agreed meekly.

I'd known that Gregory Becker had a very hard edge when I'd decided to go out with him. None of what was happening should be surprising, but it was a sharp contrast to what had happened with Marcus.

He turned and walked out the door, and I closed it with a heavy sigh.

My first priority was to get into the kitchen and get a bag of ice for my face. It hurt like hell, and I wasn't used to taking beatings anymore. It could have been a lot worse, but the volatile impact of his hand colliding with my face was causing my cheek to throb.

I held the ice to my face and kicked out of the high heels that were killing my feet.

All I wanted was to scrub off the layers of makeup from my skin, lose the butt-hugging dress I had on, and get into a warm bath.

I didn't want to think about what Greg had said.

I wanted to remember what Marcus had done to my body, and how I'd responded. Yeah, I knew that I could never let something like that happen with Marcus again, but I'd felt more alive when I'd been locked in a bathroom stall than I had in a very long time.

"I don't understand him," I murmured to myself.

Marcus could have very easily fucked me up against a bathroom wall, but all he'd done was get me off. Hard! It was almost like he said—that it really did give him an enormous amount of pleasure just to see me come.

“What guy does that?” I asked myself.

There was only one answer: Marcus Colter.

I'd been so lost in the scent of him, the taste of him, the passion in his kiss, and the raw carnality of the moment that he could have satisfied himself very easily. But he hadn't.

The rest of the night had been uncomfortable, and my mind *hadn't* been on my date. Greg had needed to repeat himself several times, and my mind *had* wandered from the superficial conversations he was having with the other guests.

I'd been able to *feel* Marcus watching me, even when my back was to him. He'd still been at the same table he'd been sitting at all night when Greg and I had left the event.

Just as I was headed toward my coveted bathtub to get water ready, my doorbell rang. My heart raced at the thought that Greg had come back for another round of abuse.

I dropped my ice pack on the side table next to the couch.

After moving close to the door, I opened it cautiously, braced for whatever Greg was going to throw at me this time.

“Marcus,” I said in a breathless voice. My body sagged in relief, happy I wasn't going to have to face Greg again.

I let him in and closed the door quickly behind him, noticing he was still wearing his tux.

“Are you okay?” he questioned in a husky voice.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” I replied. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to talk to you,” he told me urgently. “Dani, somehow I need to make you understand that you don't need Becker. I don't want to see you hurt.”

The gruff, concerned tone of his voice nearly broke me. I looked at him pleadingly. “Please, Marcus, not now.”

I wasn’t capable of any further conflict. I still struggled with some issues from my kidnapping, and I was shaken by Greg’s treatment just a short time earlier.

“What in the hell happened to you?” he asked in a terrifyingly angry voice.

I stepped back from him, but he proceeded forward, wrapping his arm around my waist while he tipped my face up. “Dani, did that bastard hit you?” His fingers trailed, featherlight, over my cheek.

“It’s no big deal. I made him mad.” I tried to pull away, not because his touch hurt me, but because Marcus affected me in ways I didn’t understand.

“I’ll fucking kill him,” he growled, his gray eyes swirling with fury. “What the fuck! Why are you letting this happen, Danica? Make me understand, and *then* I’ll go after the little prick.”

I could feel the tension in his body, and his willingness to sprint back out the door to track down Greg. “Marcus, no. You can’t confront him right now.”

“Oh, yes, I damn well can, and I will. Only a damn coward wales on a woman half his size,” he ranted. “And who gives a fuck if he got mad? That’s no excuse. There’s never an excuse for touching a woman with the intent of hurting her in any goddamn way. I get mad. *My* brothers get mad. *Your* brothers get mad. My friends get mad. What they *don’t* do is punch a woman in the face.”

“He didn’t punch me. He backhanded me.”

“Just the fact that he touched you at all is a good reason for me to hunt him down. He can’t hurt you like this, Dani. Christ! Does he know what you’ve been through? Does he even care?”

“No,” I said softly. “No to everything. He doesn’t really know me at all.”

A sob escaped my mouth. Then another. And then one more. Tears started to flow free in a river down my face. “Don’t leave me right now. Don’t go to find him,” I pleaded.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t,” he grumbled.

He was hesitating, his hand running up and down my back in comforting strokes.

“Because I need you more,” I said in a helpless tone, flinging my arms around his neck, knowing I had to let go and share my secrets.



Chapter 9



Dani

Mindlessly sobbing my heart out wasn't something I was used to doing, but it seemed so easy to just let it happen when Marcus was holding me against him, his solid body making me feel safe.

He lifted my body easily and then sat down on the couch, holding me on his lap while I released all of my sorrow, frustration, and fear.

He didn't ask any questions.

He didn't try to make me stop crying.

All he did was hold me, comfort me, giving me something I'd never had before.

"I hate crying," I finally admitted with a hiccup.

His mouth by my ear, he said in a teasing voice, "For something you hate, you seem to be doing a lot of it."

I smiled just a little, thinking that it was a typical *Marcus* kind of comment. But there was a thread of kindness running through the teasing tone, and that made me feel protected.

Honestly, Marcus made me feel safe to be myself, and I really needed to feel that way right now. "I think I'm done now."

"By all means, feel free to continue," he answered drily. "Having your shapely ass draped over my dick doesn't bother me at all."

“You’re completely perverted,” I accused as I gingerly swiped at my eyes.

“No, Dani. I’m worried about you.”

Those four simple words made my heart ache. I was used to traveling around, taking care of myself. I was alone. Always alone. I’d had a relationship in college, and I’d tried to have some kind of connection with a male correspondent, but it hadn’t ended well. Both of us traveled so much that we rarely got to meet up, and it had felt more like a friends-with-benefits type of thing. We finally broke it off, and I’d never even tried again. What was the point? I was always in motion, and no relationship had a chance when I traveled that much.

Most of the time, I didn’t mind relying on myself. I was used to going solo. But since Harper had found Blake, and after being held captive by a ruthless group of rebels, I recognized the emptiness in my soul. Problem was, I couldn’t just fill it by being with somebody. Many times, I’d be in a crowded room, but I still felt like I was alone. I’d never realized how much I craved that one person who would make me feel like I wasn’t lonely. Life experiences had changed me, and I couldn’t seem to completely fall back to the way I’d been before my kidnapping.

I guess my priorities had changed along with my personality.

“You don’t have to worry about me,” I argued.

I knew I could move now that I’d stopped crying, but the scent and feel of Marcus just felt so good that I didn’t even try.

His arms tightened around me. “For fuck’s sake, Dani, you’re dating a sociopath who just backhanded you until your face was black and blue.” He stroked a hand through my hair before adding, “Which reminds me, we need to treat that cheek.”

“I have ice,” I informed him, reaching over to the side table for the cold pack.

“Let me have it,” he rumbled, gently resting the pack on my face before he slowly slid me onto the couch so he could get up.

“Where are you going?” I hated that my voice sounded slightly panicked.

“You need to take something for pain and inflammation. Do you have that here?”

I had moved my hand to keep the cold pack on my face, and as I moved to get up, he protested. “Stay there,” he demanded. “I’ll find it.”

I tried not to notice that Marcus’s gruff protectiveness was one of the best things I’d experienced since my kidnapping. Maybe I shouldn’t find it as sweet as I did. It wasn’t like he was pouring on the charm because he really wasn’t all that charming. Or maybe he wasn’t to most people. But I found him nearly irresistible. Meaningless words and actions weren’t Marcus’s style, which made his protective instincts heartbreakingly adorable.

I directed him to the kitchen cupboard. I wasn’t able to see his face once he opened the door, but I could hear him rifling through the items impatiently until he found what he wanted.

He brought some ibuprofen and a glass of ice water.

“Nobody has taken care of me for a long time,” I mentioned as I accepted the items from him, dutifully swallowing the pills.

“I’m starting to think you need a damn bodyguard,” he said in a disgruntled tone as he sat back down on the sofa next to me, and took over holding the cold pack to my face and gathered me into his arms.

I sighed as I curled my feet beneath me and leaned against him. “Are you applying for the job?”

“Hell, no. I’d probably kill any guy who got within ten feet of you. I can’t watch this, Danica. I can’t see somebody hurt

you again,” he answered in a husky, annoyed tone. “It nearly killed me to see what the rebels had done to you, and I can’t get the images of them abusing you out of my damn head. I know you made a mistake by crossing the border, but you did it to save some stupid teenagers. I get that. But why in the hell would you let *Becker* do this to you? Why?”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly before I answered. “It took me some time to get my head straight after we came back to the US. I had intensive therapy, but I was suffering from PTSD and anxiety. It was so bad I was afraid of almost everything and everyone at first.”

“Understandable,” Marcus remarked. “Anybody would have felt the same way.”

“But I hated it. I’ve never been afraid of anything. I traveled the world alone.”

“You’re definitely fearless,” he agreed.

“No, I *was* fearless, Marcus,” I said. “Now I have to push through the fear I never felt before. I’ve come a long way in counseling, and after I’d become a little more stable, I remembered something I’d heard while I was in captivity. I remembered after I’d gotten over the initial trauma.”

“What?”

“I told you that I speak and understand Arabic, right?”

“Yeah.”

“The terrorists mentioned Gregory Becker’s name. Marcus, he’s helping to fund the rebels. He’s laundering funds to them. And I mean *a lot* of money. They consider him their leader in their war to take over territory because he’s the money behind it. His disgusting businesses like human trafficking and drugs help get the rebels to take more and more areas.”

He didn’t question my knowledge. “Jesus Christ! Why? I heard he was funding terrorists, but I never understood it. What in the hell does he have to gain?” he rasped.

“Money and power,” I told him. “He thinks the rebels are going to take control, which will give *him* control of the oil and resources. He doesn’t give a damn what their motivation might be. All he wants is to be king of the resources that will make him the richest man on earth. It’s crazy, but that’s the way he thinks.”

“Then why are you with him, Dani? If you overheard all this, what are you doing here? Why would you want to be with an asshole like him?”

I sighed, knowing it was time for me to be straight with Marcus. “I couldn’t go back to my Middle East beat, so I decided to get an exclusive story right here in my own country. He needs to be stopped. And nobody can get the evidence to convict him. I’ve heard he keeps a record of his illegal transactions so he knows how much money has been funneled to the terrorists, and by what method or shell company. If I can find that journal, I’d have the information to have him put away forever. The funding to the terrorists would stop, and he wouldn’t be able to keep luring women into prostitution or human trafficking.”

“Fuck! You were planning on exposing him yourself?” Marcus exploded.

“Not exactly. I was going to take the information to the authorities, and time my exclusive to come out the same day they arrest him. Obviously, they’d need time to track down the evidence in a more substantial form than just a journal. But those records would give them the information they need to do it.”

“So you don’t love Becker?”

I tried to shake my head against his shoulder. “No.”

“Why did you say you needed him?”

“I *do* need him. I have to gain his trust. He finally asked me to come to his house, so I can get access to his home office and get what I need.”

“You don’t like being with him?”

“I like being with him as much as I’d like being in a locked room with venomous snakes,” I said with a shudder. “I can barely stand next to him. I can’t stand it when he touches me, and I have to hold back my hatred while he’s kissing me.”

“The bastard kissed you?” Marcus asked in a pissed-off tone.

“What choice did I have but to pretend I was hot for him? But every moment of it has been pure torture. However, if I can help take him down, it will be worth it.”

“The clothes?”

“He chooses exactly how he wants me to look. Becker is a control freak. Unfortunately, he’s fond of the hooker attire. He’s an asshole who thinks he owns every female he dates or screws. There isn’t an ounce of decency in him, Marcus, and believe me, I’ve looked. He’s pure evil.”

It felt good to finally tell somebody why I was trying to get close to Becker, but I knew it was going to cause complications.

“I’m relieved you haven’t lost your common sense completely, and you see Becker for what he is, but you can’t do this alone. And you can’t see him again, Danica. The abuse will just get worse from now on, and you’re putting your ass in danger...*again*.”

“I’m not quitting. I’ve already gotten close to him, close enough to get the information we need to put him away.”

I’d known I had to tell Marcus the truth. He deserved it. He’d saved my life, and I really didn’t want him to continue to think I was submitting to a crazed lunatic. I was hoping if I told him the truth, he’d stop riding my butt about not seeing Becker again. Apparently...not.

“You’re quitting. If I have to, I’ll kidnap you myself,” he said in a demanding voice.

I sat up and stared him in the eyes. “Try it. I’m not budging. Too many other people’s lives are at stake. Greg has to be stopped. He’s power hungry, and things could get even worse than they are now. What if he decides he needs to win more territory, more wars? He’s a master at covering his ass. He’s wary, paranoid, and devious as hell. Obviously he’s been a suspect for a long time, but nobody has been able to take him down. The authorities need information, data I can give them if I can just get to it.”

“So you’re just going to go to his home, fuck him, then look for the information?”

I shook my head slowly. “I don’t think I can let him touch me like that. I think I’ll throw up. I have to think of another way.”

“You make me crazy, woman. First, I’m rescuing you from the hands of people who would have eventually killed you, and now you’re getting yourself in too deep at home. This is risky and dangerous.”

“I can handle this, Marcus. I know I can. I have to do it to prove that I can still do something important. When I wasn’t able to go back to the Middle East, I missed it. There, I felt like I was telling important stories. I wanted people to understand the human suffering that was happening in that region. What I did meant something back then, and even though it might have been somewhat risky, bringing information out of those areas was vital. I lost that. Now I want to do something that’s going to help people again. I want to be done with being afraid. I want to do something useful.”

“You’re not doing this alone,” he insisted as he pulled my body against him again. “I can’t see you taking those kinds of risks.”

“I have no choice. Until I get the information, nobody will be able to touch him.” I sighed. “I have a friend I made here in Miami, a woman who was homeless and was taken in by what

I believe is one of Greg's human trafficking teams. They lured her in with a story about helping her get on her feet with a job, shelter, and food. Now they're telling her that she owes them, and that she can't leave until she pays them back. These jerks prey on the most vulnerable of people. Ruby was young. She hasn't even hit her twenty-third birthday yet, and they want to auction her off so some rich man can use her body. This makes it even more personal to me. And the worst part is that I can't take her in. I can't help her and break my trust with Greg right now. But something has to happen soon. I have to rescue Ruby, and all the money is going to do is make the rebels stronger."

"Jesus! You're so damn stubborn. Why can't you understand that I will *never* let you do this alone? I get why you want to do it, but it's a risk you can't take by yourself. And you can't meet Becker again. If I see as much as a tiny scratch on you, I'll lose it."

"I'll fight him. I won't hold back and let him hurt me again. I can't. It's not good for my psyche."

"That's not enough. I'm going to help you, Dani, and it's going to be on my terms."

I was alarmed. "Marcus, you can't. It's dangerous enough for me, but for a man who is on his tail, it's suicidal. He'd kill anyone who he thought was trying to dig up dirt on him."

"He won't suspect me," he said nonchalantly.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because there are things you don't know about me either, Dani, things nobody knows except my family."

"What?" I asked breathlessly because his voice had suddenly turned so grim.

"I have the knowledge and the expertise to help you nail Becker."

"How?"

“Because I’ve been gathering intel for a very long time. I’m not *just* an international businessman.”

I was silent, waiting for his explanation.

He continued matter-of-factly, “I’m also a spy.”



Chapter 10



Dani

A spy?

Lord help me, I'd never thought of Marcus as delusional, but what he'd just uttered made no sense.

"What do you mean?" I asked hesitantly.

He answered calmly. "I mean that I work with the US government to gather intel from all of the countries I visit. I have a network of contacts, and I get whatever information I can to protect our national security."

"Intel is CIA stuff," I answered, still wondering where he was going with this conversation.

"Technically, I'm not on the CIA payroll. I'm a special agent because I chose to be."

My mind flashed back to every location where I'd seen Marcus in the past. It had occurred to me so many times that he didn't need to put himself in harm's way, but he was in every hot spot in the world.

Sweet Jesus! Could what he was saying really be true? "H-how?" I stammered, still unable to reconcile Marcus the businessman with Marcus as some kind of James Bond. Not that the CIA really worked like the movie portrayals, but still...

He shrugged. "It's not a big deal. I mostly just gather intelligence, and I've never really been suspect because I travel the world for business."

“Marcus, you do it in foreign countries where you could be killed by anybody who finds out you’re sharing their information,” I said, astonished that a man as rich as Marcus would put his butt on the line like that.

“I don’t generally broadcast what I’m doing,” he answered drily.

“It’s dangerous,” I protested. “Who do you have for backup?”

“No one. I answer only to the top government officials. Nobody else knows.”

“What does your family think about these extracurricular activities? Have you told them that you’re going all James Bond while you’re traveling overseas?”

He released a masculine sigh. “First of all, special agents *don’t* go James Bond. Sometimes it’s actually rather boring.”

“Do you carry a gun?” I challenged.

“Of course. But a lot of people do.”

“Marcus, don’t bullshit me. Poking around in some third world countries could get you murdered.”

“Being a foreign correspondent can be just as bad. If I remember correctly, I *did* pull your gorgeous ass out of a rather ugly situation.”

He had me there. My job had put me too close to the front lines at times. “I was doing it for a cause. People need to know what’s happening in the world.”

“And I do what I do for my country. I hate politics, and I don’t like being involved in DC bullshit. That’s why my help is kept low profile. I wouldn’t last ten minutes doing Blake’s job as a senator. Right now, country doesn’t come before party for most of the DC crowd. It’s all about money. I’d put my fist in somebody’s face if I had to spend very long in Washington.”

I tried not to smile because we were talking about something dead serious, but I could see Marcus losing his patience in one hell of a hurry on the hill. He didn't have the personality for that scene.

"You never answered my question about your family. Have they always known? How long have you been an agent?" I questioned, wanting to know everything at once. Honestly, I was still dumbstruck from his revelations. It wasn't that I didn't think Marcus had the balls for that kind of work, but it was a part of him I'd never seen before, and I was fascinated.

"They didn't know until recently. I had to tell them when one of my investigations got a little too close to home."

I listened closely as he told me about how his brother, Tate, and a female FBI agent had gotten inadvertently involved in an arms smuggling deal.

"So Tate ended up married to the FBI agent?" I queried when he was done with his story. I hadn't been back to Colorado in years, so I had no idea what the Colters were doing. Jett occasionally talked about Marcus, but other than a brief mention of the family by my brother, I was in the dark.

"Yeah. I was glad he met Lara. She's good for him, but I've never forgiven myself for nearly getting both of them killed. From that moment on, I never did anything that could even remotely endanger anyone in my family. If I can't deal with the situation completely out of the country, I don't get involved. I felt like I owed it to my family to let them know what I was doing."

"Don't they worry?"

"All the fucking time," he answered in a disgruntled voice. "My mother is terrified somebody will kill me every time I leave."

"Can you blame her? She loves you."

“Tate was Special Forces. That was a hell of a lot more dangerous than what I do.”

“Had I known what you and Jett were doing with PRO, I would have been anxious every time you left,” I told him honestly.

My brother had kept his involvement with PRO a secret until the mission where he was injured and the group shut down. Had I known they were sneaking into dangerous territory to rescue political prisoners, I know both Harper and I would have been worried sick.

Now, Marcus’s forming of PRO in the first place made sense. He’d obviously learned his covert operation skills from years of spying on other countries.

“We saved lives,” he stated. “But I doubt I’ll ever stop feeling guilty about Jett’s injuries. He’s the only one who will probably never fully recover. He’ll always carry the scars.”

I saw the tension in his expression and reached out to smooth out the lines on his face. “Don’t. You can’t change what’s already done. It was an accident. He’s alive. It was nobody’s fault, Marcus. You *did* save lives, and Jett told me he’d do it all over again.”

He caught my hand in his and lowered our conjoined hands to his thigh. “He told me the same thing several times. But he lost everything that meant something to him.”

“He lost *Lisette*, and it was the best thing that could happen. She didn’t love him. He would have ended up miserable.”

“Yeah. And I hear she’s in trouble anyway. Something about some kind of tax fraud,” he mentioned casually.

I shot him a curious look. “Tax fraud? How would you know that? Do you know her?”

“Nope. Never met her. But I do have a friend at the IRS. Seems she’s been a little less than honest about paying her

taxes.”

“You got her in trouble?” I asked incredulously.

“Absolutely not. She’s the one who didn’t pay her taxes. It must be tough now that she’s cut off from Jett’s money.”

It struck me as funny that Marcus could share that information without ever tipping his hand. If I didn’t know he’d instigated the investigation on Lisette, I’d swear he was completely innocent. “You’re bad,” I told him, secretly happy that the woman who had dumped my brother so heartlessly was now in a mess of trouble. “Honestly, I’m glad she’s paying in some way for what she did to Jett.”

“Oh, she’s going to be paying,” Marcus remarked casually.

Just the fact that he’d tried to avenge Jett was pretty damn awesome. I’d never seen that side of Marcus. Really, I hadn’t ever known him at all. His arrogance annoyed me at times, but if he was spying on foreign countries, he had to have balls of steel. “Thank you,” I said softly.

“Jett is my friend,” he stated simply. “And now we need to stop talking about me and get back to this issue with Becker.”

“I can’t give up, Marcus. And it isn’t all about a scoop. Becker has to be stopped for many reasons.” People like Ruby and everyone Greg was putting in danger needed somebody to fight for them. If I could help put him away, I was going to do it.

“He’s been on our radar for a long time. But without solid evidence, there isn’t much we can do. He’s a slippery bastard,” Marcus grumbled.

“He’s paranoid,” I agreed. “He’s anal about covering all his bases.”

“What’s your plan?” he asked unhappily.

“I’m going to have access to his house next Friday. He wants me to meet him there in the evening. Somehow I have to

get into his home office. I think that's where he keeps his records of his nonbusiness transactions. If I can get those, they can be tracked and confirmed pretty quickly."

Marcus took the ice pack I'd let slide away from my face and held it gently back on my cheek. "This is all crazy. You know that, right? Becker is an international criminal and has never hesitated to eliminate anybody who gets in his way."

I nodded. "I learned that the hard way."

"Christ! I hate this, Dani. I hate you getting involved with him. I hate the fact that you put yourself in danger. I hate that the fucker actually hit you, and I can't kill him for that. Just the fact that he's touched you in any way makes me insane," he finished with a growl.

My heart was pounding against my chest wall, the intense look on Marcus's face reminding me of our earlier encounter. "Then help me," I pleaded, knowing I could use his expertise. I was in over my head, and I was smart enough to know it. I didn't want to get him involved, but I knew it was the only way he wouldn't sabotage my efforts.

"I'm going to do more than help you. I'm going to be your partner. And if you do a single thing that I don't agree with, you're out of there," he demanded.

"Okay," I murmured, willing to agree to his terms. I had no doubt he could execute a plan better than I could.

"You should still be recovering, not putting yourself into another bad situation," he muttered irritably.

I gave him a weak smile. "I guess I've never been good at being idle."

"I'll make sure you don't get hurt, and then I'll insist on you taking some downtime. It hasn't been that long since you nearly died, Danica. You *need* to take some time off, whether you want to or not. You can find something a hell of a lot less dangerous to do."

Not staying busy did nothing but remind me how much I'd isolated myself. Before, I'd spent so much time chasing stories that I never really thought about how alone I felt. Sure, I had great siblings, but they were all busy with their own lives. "Time off gets lonely," I admitted before I could stop myself.

Marcus's arm snaked around my waist, and he pulled me against his very solid, warm body. "You're not alone anymore, Dani," he stated in a husky voice.

I absorbed his warmth, soaking it up like a sponge. Honestly, maybe the reason Marcus and I had fought so much in the past was because we were both so much alike in some ways. We were both independent, and we'd spent our whole adult lives traveling by ourselves. Neither of us had ever had somebody to lean on or talk to about how we felt. Both of us had put emotion aside like it wasn't important.

The problem was, I couldn't ignore how I was feeling anymore.

I laid my head against his shoulder and breathed in his masculine scent, feeling like I *wasn't* really alone. At least for a little while.



Chapter 11



Marcus

“Hey man, what’s happening with my little sister?” Jett Lawson asked as I opened the door of my condo the next afternoon.

I was surprised, but I probably shouldn’t be. Nothing kept Jett down for very long. “I thought you were having surgery,” I answered, slapping him on the back as he entered with a canvas bag slung over his shoulder.

“They did it yesterday. It was no big deal,” he answered, dropping his bag on the floor. “How do you feel about having a visitor? I wanted to see if I could talk some sense into Dani.”

“You don’t ever need to ask if you can stay with me. You always have an open invitation.” I was glad to see him, but I felt a little bit guilty over the fact that I was lusting after his sister, and it kept getting worse every single day.

He dropped his bag on the floor. “Thanks. So what’s up with Dani?”

I moved into the living room to get us a drink. Jett followed behind me with a slight limp. He was doing okay, but his leg bothered him when he did too much, which was pretty much all the time. My friend had a tenacity that humbled me sometimes. I knew he’d come out of his accident with injuries that not many people could survive, but he kept himself in optimal condition, which had probably saved his life. He was stubborn, but it was a quality that served him well right now.

“There’s a lot happening that you don’t know about,” I warned him as I went to the bar to pour us a drink.

Jett flopped onto the couch. “Good or bad?”

I grimaced. “Both. The good news is that your sister isn’t in love with an asshole. The bad news is that she’s gotten herself into a situation that’s going to be messy.”

I caught him up with the whole situation with Becker, and then answered his questions after I’d handed him a drink and took a seat in the chair next to the sofa.

Jett shook his head. “I love my sister, but sometimes I wish she’d take up something a little less adventurous to do for a living.”

“It’s not just about a story for her anymore, Jett.”

“Shit! I know that,” he replied with frustration. “But I feel so damn helpless to do anything to help her.”

“I’m helping her,” I reassured him. “One sign of danger and I’m pulling her out.”

“And she agreed?” Jett questioned skeptically.

I shrugged. “More or less. Probably less than more, but her ass is gone if Becker so much as looks at her the wrong way.”

“Knowing that he hit her makes me want to kill the bastard,” Jett said irritably.

I knew exactly how he felt. Dani had been through so damn much, and until last night, I’d never seen her really lose it. She was so damn brave, but her courage made me nervous as hell. Maybe she’d become a bit warier after her kidnapping, but her sense of justice and duty was still just as strong as it had always been. “We can’t kill him,” I finally answered unhappily. “We have to find out who else is involved.”

“You have a good system here? I could try to do some checking,” he offered. “I think if we knock out the kingpin, the

rest will fall. But it wouldn't hurt to try to do some digging for information."

I shot him a knowing look. "You mean some *hacking*?"

"Hell, no. That would be completely illegal," he said in feigned protest.

I smirked at him, knowing that Jett had no problem hacking into a system if he needed vital information. He'd done it plenty of times for PRO missions, and he was one of the best at it. "I have everything set up in my office. Feel free to search for information. But before you get started, there's something I need to tell you."

Since I'd come clean with Danica, I needed to do the same with Jett. I wanted him to have confidence that I could help his sister, and telling him about my history would probably help. Hell, Jett was like a brother to me, so it would be like telling family. I'd trust him with my life, so I could tell him my secrets, too.

I informed him about my dual careers as briefly as possible.

"Holy shit, man," Jett said. "So you go all James Bond in foreign countries."

I shot him a disgusted look and then rolled my eyes. "You of all people have to know that nobody does *James Bond*. They're movies. Fictional characters. I'm pretty sure most agents sit behind a desk most of the day and try to dig up computer intel." I hesitated before adding, "Maybe you should be a special agent instead of me. I think they need your skills more than mine."

"Don't downplay what you're doing, buddy," Jett said in a serious tone. "It's dangerous, and it's pretty damn patriotic to risk your ass to keep our country safe."

"It's not a big deal. I have to travel anyway."

"But you don't *have* to spy for intel. That could get you killed. I don't know a lot of rich guys who'd do the same."

“You’d do it,” I challenged.

Jett shrugged. “Maybe. We’re both crazy adrenaline junkies. Maybe that’s why we’re such good friends.”

“Just like your sister,” I accused. “She’s just as nuts as we are. Not a good quality for a woman who has already been through hell.”

“She’s always been that way,” Jett commented thoughtfully. “Even when we were kids, she was pretty fearless.”

I could hardly tell Jett that I hated her courage right now. Dani made me half crazy, and I needed to get a grip on my irritation. Jett’s sister was off-limits. I wanted to fuck her worse than I’ve ever wanted any woman. But I also admired her, and the last thing I wanted was friction with my best friend because I was having a fling with his little sister. Dani and I could never have anything more than a brief affair. I wasn’t capable of having a relationship. I never had been. I traveled too much, and I had very little to offer a woman except money.

“I don’t like this,” I admitted. “I don’t like any of it. Becker is a prick. Your sister could find herself tangled up in something she can’t handle.”

“I don’t like it, either,” Jett confessed. “I’d get her away from here now if I could, but you know how stubborn she can be when she has her mind made up to do something. All of us tried to talk her out of her chosen career, especially being a Middle East correspondent. Not a single one of us could make her budge. She loved her job, Marcus. Dani is the type of woman who wanted to expose everything that’s wrong with the world and drag it out into the open.”

“I fucking know that. It’s part of what makes me crazy. She has good intentions, but she puts herself in too much danger.”

“Hey. You sound really concerned. You okay?” Jett asked.

I knew what he meant. I was generally a prick, and pretty free from emotional entanglement. But there was something about Danica that made me want to protect her. I could tell myself it was because of her past experience of being at the mercy of madmen, but to be honest, the compulsion had *always* been there. It was just getting harder and harder to ignore.

Somehow, in some insane way, we *got* each other. I understood her, and strangely enough, she seemed to have gotten under my skin. There was some force pushing us together, and I felt almost helpless to stop the stream of unfamiliar feelings that rose up every time I saw her.

But my emotional involvement had to stop. I needed to think like a professional, help her in any way I could, and stop worrying about her so damn much.

“Yeah,” I finally replied. “I’m good.”

“Is something going on between you and Dani?” Jett asked suspiciously.

“Not at all,” I answered smoothly.

Nothing except a certain encounter where I got your sister off in a public bathroom just so I could watch her come.

But I wasn’t about to go there with Jett.

“She’s an amazing woman,” he pushed. “It wouldn’t be that surprising if you *were* attracted to her. Actually, you two are a lot alike.”

“I’m not attracted to her,” I denied. “I like her and she’s your sister. I want to help her.”

Jett looked like he wanted to say more, but he dropped the subject. “If Becker is as paranoid as Dani says he is, I doubt she’s going to be able to get the documents you need out of his house.”

“I’ve thought about that,” I informed him. “I’m going to get some special equipment from the department.”

“Spy gadgets?” Jett asked jokingly.

“Actually, yeah. Sometimes being an agent comes in handy. They have technology that most people don’t.”

Jett polished off his drink and then stood up. “You know I’m going to want to see them.”

“I know,” I answered elusively.

“I’m going to go try out your system. See what I can find out on Becker.”

“Just don’t do anything illegal on my computers,” I warned, knowing damn well that Jett was so good at what he did that he’d never get caught.

“No promises,” Jett mumbled. “If my sister’s life is at stake, I’ll do what I have to do. I may not have much as far as physical capabilities, but I do have skills.”

“I’m well aware of that,” I told him. I knew that he was one of the best when it came to computer spying, information gathering, and anything else on the web or the dark web.

“Takeout for dinner? Pizza would be good. I’m starving.”

“I don’t generally do pizza. Hell, I’ve never figured out how you eat so much junk food and still manage to stay in shape.” Jett had always been physically strong, and even though he was injured, he was still pretty bulked up.

“I work out,” he said defensively. “And I don’t always do junk food.”

“Only ninety-nine percent of the time,” I said in a sarcastic tone.

He grinned. “Then you admit that I occasionally eat healthy?”

“Hardly ever.”

“Like you should talk,” Jett joked. “Half the time you eat on the run and do protein drinks. We could both use some protein *and* carbs right now.”

“Fine. I’ll order pizza,” I conceded.

It wasn’t that I didn’t *like* pizza, burgers, fries, and all of the other things guaranteed to give me early heart failure, but I tried to avoid them, and I worked out as often as possible. I was in my mid-thirties, and I wasn’t getting any younger. With all the traveling and CIA business I had to do, I needed to be able to keep my body in the best shape possible.

“I want it loaded,” he insisted as he walked toward my office.

“As much grease as possible?” I asked.

“You got it,” he answered with a laugh as he disappeared through the door leading to my sophisticated computer system.

My stomach growled, and I realized that I was hungry, too. Usually I’d send George out to find me a healthy meal. Instead, I found myself looking up pizza joints and calling in a very large order.



Chapter 12



Dani

“Touch that last piece of pizza and you’re a dead man,” I warned my brother, Jett, as I snatched the last slice of the heavily loaded pie and slapped his hand away.

Generally, I wasn’t the type to invite myself over to somebody’s house, but when I heard that my brother was in town, I’d hightailed it over to Marcus’s place. Luckily, I’d arrived just as the pizza was delivered.

I had impeccable timing when it came to food.

“I’m certainly not going to fight you for it,” Marcus commented drily.

I chewed and swallowed a heavenly bite of the greasy pizza before I answered, “You didn’t eat much.”

“He’s a food snob,” Jett informed me. “He doesn’t like junk food.”

“I didn’t say I don’t like it,” Marcus argued. “It’s just not healthy.”

We were all sitting around the dining room table at Marcus’s condo. Of course, I made sure I was closest to the food. “What *is* healthy anymore?” I asked.

“Certainly not a ton of grease and cardboard,” Marcus answered stuffily.

I couldn’t argue with the fact that the man was in prime condition. But he was way too regimented. “So no chocolate?” I asked.

“Rarely,” he confirmed.

“And I suppose you don’t eat food from street vendors?”

“Never.”

Good Lord, he really needed to lighten up. Yeah, I probably ate way too much fast food or things that I got on the go. I was usually too impatient to cook, and being on the road all the time made it difficult to grab anything except fast food.

“How do you eat when you’re traveling?”

Marcus shrugged. “I usually have one of my assistants find me something decent.”

“So where are your assistants now?”

He shot me a disgruntled expression as he answered, “I didn’t have time to get somebody to meet me here, and it was personal. I had to chase down some crazy female. And since it wasn’t business, I came alone.”

I kind of liked the fact that Marcus had done something spontaneous and specifically because he was concerned about me, even though he *had* just called me *crazy*.

“So none of them know about your assistance to the government?” Jett chimed in.

“Nobody knows except you two outside of my own family.”

“How do you manage that?” Jett asked.

“I don’t let my employees get involved in my personal life.”

I finished off my slice of pizza and washed it down with one of the sugary sodas that had come with the delivery. I usually preferred diet, but I made do. A woman had to save on calories somewhere, and I preferred to sacrifice my drinks rather than my food.

I watched silently as Jett and Marcus became involved in a discussion about cyber security, one of Jett's favorite subjects. I couldn't help but notice how closed off Marcus seemed, even though I knew he could be thoughtful when he wanted to be. I'd always seen him as arrogant, but some of his overconfidence probably came from being so self-contained. He'd spent most of his time traveling, so he'd only had himself to rely on, and he hadn't shared much about his personal mission to keep our country safe. It had to be hard to be unable to share so much of his life.

I knew exactly how he functioned because I'd spent so much of my own life exactly the same way. Maybe I hadn't been hiding the fact that I was some kind of roaming spy, but I knew what it was like to have to keep everything inside myself. Except for my brief affair with another correspondent who was more like a casual friend and acquaintance, I'd always been lonely. I'd just been too busy and focused to recognize those emotions. Or maybe I'd just never met anyone I really wanted to talk to about my travels except my siblings, and they had their own lives, their own interests.

I knew that the last person I should be attracted to was Marcus, but I couldn't seem to shake off the chemistry and emotional draw that I felt whenever I was with him.

He was actually dressed casually today, and the look suited him. His butt filled out a pair of jeans like I'd never seen them filled before. Marcus was hot, but there was so much more than just his physical appearance that made me want to fly close enough to his heat to get myself burned.

He might be here now, but he'll be gone soon. He's an international businessman who travels most of the time. I can't even think about getting involved with him.

My body wanted to say *yes*, but my common sense was screaming at me to ignore how much I wanted him.

I was still trying to figure out who I was after everything that happened to me during my kidnapping. Marcus was guaranteed to mess with my newfound sense of peace.

Maybe I wasn't the woman I'd been a year ago, but I was okay with that now. Life was full of heartache and change, and I was going through a period in my life where I just had to search for something new.

My first priority was to put away the man who was funding a group of terrorists so they couldn't hurt anybody else. My sense of justice wouldn't let me rest until I did.

"Dani?" my brother said in a loud voice.

I heard him, and I suddenly brought myself out of my own thoughts. "Yeah?"

"Did you hear me?" Jett asked, his voice concerned. "Are you okay? I asked you twice what you thought about Becker's motives for funding the rebels."

"Sorry," I answered. "I was thinking about something else."

I was busy daydreaming about crawling up Marcus's amazingly hard body and begging him to do me.

"What were you thinking about?" Marcus inquired.

"Nothing important," I said hurriedly. "So what did you want to know?"

"Becker's motives?" Jett repeated.

"He's never talked to me specifically about any of his illegal activities," I informed my brother. "But I think he's delusional. His motivation for everything is money, but I think he also wants power. In funding the terrorist group, I think he's under the impression it will give him control of the resources in the region if they can take possession of the area. Nothing else makes sense, and I've watched him pretty closely. Money and power are the most important things in life to him."

“He certainly doesn’t value the women in his life,” Marcus grumbled.

“No, he doesn’t,” I concurred. “They’re just something he wants control over. Something he can use to vent his crazy anger on. I’m not a *person* to him. I’m a *possession*.”

“Fuck! I hate using you to get information,” Marcus exploded. “It’s insanity to think you might not get hurt.”

“I might. But it’s worth the risk to me. I’ve done plenty of risky investigative work, Marcus.”

“I know. I’ve seen you in action. And it scares the hell out of me.”

“Me, too,” Jett added.

“I’m a grown woman,” I argued. “I have been for a long time. I’ve been out there alone chasing stories for years now.”

“I don’t think either one of us doubts your courage, Dani,” my brother answered. “Hell, I’m pretty sure that you were so confident that none of us even quite understood how vulnerable you really were. If we had, I think we would have put personal security on you.”

“I would have gotten rid of them,” I retorted. “One of the reasons I went blonde and tried to change my appearance was to disassociate myself with the billionaire Lawsons. Very few people even knew I was related to one of the world’s richest families, and I wanted it to stay that way.”

Just like Marcus, I didn’t let anybody into my personal life. I wanted everyone to focus on the problems I was investigating and the story I had to tell, not my identity. My bylines on written articles were published as Dee Lawson, and I used the same name with my on-air reports.

I’d asked my network to use the name “D. Lawson” in the very beginning of my career, and they’d ended up printing it as “Dee Lawson.” The moniker had stuck with me for the rest of my years as a reporter, making it less likely that anyone would

recognize my unusual first name and immediately associate me with the wealthy Lawson family.

“So nobody ever really knew who you were?” Marcus questioned.

I shook my head. “Nobody really knew me. I was just some pushy American reporter to most people. My crew didn’t even know.”

The only individuals who were privy to that information were the human resources department of my network, and my bosses. Otherwise, I was just Dee. And that freedom had become important to me while I was climbing the ranks within the network.

“I knew you, Danica,” Marcus answered in a hoarse voice.

“I know. I was always afraid you’d give me away, but you never did.”

We’d pretty much ignored each other, or we fought when we were out of earshot of other people. In many ways, I’d tried to push him as far away from me as he could get.

“You could have told me. I never would have outed you,” Marcus answered in a curt tone.

“You never did anyway. We barely spoke to each other.”

My brother stood up and tossed back the last of his soda before he said, “I’m out of here. I want to go dig up as much dirt on Becker as possible.”

I got to my feet, too. “I should get going.”

Jett had left the room when Marcus asked in a low voice, “Why do you have to leave? Do you have a date?”

I knew he was concerned about me meeting up with Becker again. “I’m not going out with Greg without telling you.”

“Somebody else?” he asked as he followed me to the door.

“So what if I do?” I asked him irritably. “What does it matter who I see if I’m not going out with Greg?”

He put his hand on the door as I went to open it and then pinned me into a small space by placing his other hand on the wall. “It matters,” he answered simply.

I looked up at him, my body trembling with need as our gazes met in some kind of heated battle that I didn’t quite understand.

“Does it?” I asked in a husky whisper.

“Yeah. It does. Don’t see anybody else, Danica.”

“Are you afraid Greg will find out?”

“Screw Becker. I don’t give a damn what he thinks. I don’t want to see you with another man.”

I wasn’t sure what he wanted from me, but his eyes were blazing with fire as he held my gaze.

His masculine scent assaulted my senses, and my pulse started to race. I finally answered him with a breathless tone that had nothing to do with fear. “I have to go...do laundry.”

Okay, that was probably a lame excuse for leaving like my ass was on fire, but I was confused, and I knew I couldn’t take much more of Marcus’s presence without wanting to get him naked.

As my words sunk in for him, he started to smirk. “In that case, I have some dirty shirts that need to be done.”

I shot him a fake, sunny smile. “Then I guess you’re going to be busy tonight, too,” I answered in a smart-ass tone. “Good night, Marcus.”

I pulled on the door, and he finally removed his powerful hold on my exit. He leaned down before I could open the door, his warm breath wafting over my ear, causing me to pause with a shiver. “As soon as you leave, I’m going to take a shower so I can get myself off while I think about every dirty

thing I'd like to do to you. I can't look at you without getting hard. I never could," he shared in a smooth-as-good-whiskey voice that made me crazy.

"Thanks for sharing," I answered nervously, knowing I was going to be thinking about the exact image he'd just brought to my mind, and it was going to last all night long.

Marcus...

Naked.

Wet.

Hard.

Stroking himself while he thought about doing dirty things to me.

Straining as his body finally found release.

Heat rushed between my thighs. "I hate you for doing that," I informed him.

"No, you don't," he countered. "You're turned on and we both know it."

"Dream on," I said haughtily as I pulled on the doorknob and rushed out the open door, unable to keep trading barbs with him when all I wanted to do was strip off his clothes and climb his body like it was a tree.

As I hurried to the elevator, I heard a sound that was completely foreign to me.

It took a moment for the noise to connect to its source for me.

It was Marcus Colter's wicked laugh.



Chapter 13



Dani

I was busy for the rest of the week.

Marcus and Jett insisted that I move my clothes and belongings to Marcus's condo just in case I got caught and needed to hide out after my meeting with Gregory Becker.

Actually, most of the orders were coming from Marcus, and over a space of several days, I found out how careful, cautious, and annoyingly anal he could be. I knew the fact that he was covering all of his bases came from his years of gathering intelligence for the CIA, but he wasn't exactly subtle about what he wanted. When he "suggested," what he actually meant was for me to move my ass and do whatever he wanted. Even though being bossed around grinded on me, I respected his experience, so I complied gratefully, wondering why I'd never thought about or planned for some of the things he mentioned.

Probably because I've never been a spy. I was sure Marcus's life depended on him being anal about planning.

"Are you really ready for this, Dani?" Jett asked nervously as I stood in the living room of my condo Friday night, ready and dressed exactly the way Greg liked.

My brother and Marcus had come to the house as soon as it was dark, only entering after they'd verified that I wasn't being watched.

Jett's concerned tone made my heart ache. Even if I *wasn't* ready to try to get information from Greg's home, I wouldn't let Jett know it. He'd been through way too much himself to

worry about me. If I showed the slightest hint of hesitation, I knew my brother and Marcus would cancel the entire mission. “I’m fine. I think that Marcus more than covered any possibility,” I answered confidently, yanking on my tiny red skirt so it completely covered my ass.

“No, I didn’t,” Marcus said stoically. “Nobody can ever be ready for everything. But we’ve taken some measures to ensure that you’re safe.”

My cell phone rang in the tiny clutch I was holding, and I dug into the bag, worried that Greg was calling to cancel.

But it wasn’t Becker.

“It’s Ruby,” I told Marcus, turning away to answer the phone, stepping toward my bedroom where Ruby wouldn’t hear the two guys in my condo.

“Hey Rubes,” I answered cheerfully.

We’d spoken once earlier in the week, and she’d been safe. I’d called Marcus after the conversation, letting him know that I had to get Ruby out of the bad situation she’d fallen into.

“Dani,” she replied in a relieved voice. “It’s tonight. The auction is tonight. The people taking care of me just called. They told me to shower and to shave. Everywhere.”

My heart fell. I had been hoping I could swing by and get her out of her hotel tonight, right after my last encounter with Becker. That had been my plan. The moment I was finished gathering information to bust the bastard, I’d have no reason *not* to pick Ruby up and get her to a safe place.

“Where is it happening?” I asked breathlessly.

“I think it’s some kind of underground club right down the street, from what I could get from conversations. Dark Satisfactions is the name of it. I heard people talking here. That’s all I know. They’re coming to get me, and to make sure I’m completely shaved. I get why they’re doing it. I might be a virgin, but I’m not stupid. They cater to kink.”

I was more than certain that the club did indeed cater to unusual preferences, and they wanted Ruby to appear as young as possible.

Jesus! What in the hell was I going to do? I turned and looked at my brother and Marcus. As I remembered how much info Jett had been able to get on Becker, I was struck with an idea. “Jett!” I said urgently, holding the phone away from my mouth.

My brother broke off his conversation with Marcus to answer, “Yeah?”

“Did you see any information on Dark Satisfactions when you were looking for info? It’s an underground club.”

He nodded. “Connected to Becker, but in a convoluted way. It’s on the dark web.”

The club’s connection to Becker wasn’t really a surprise. I’d always suspected he was involved with Ruby’s plight in some way. I lifted the phone again to tell Ruby, “Don’t argue with anything they want. We got the location, and I’m sending somebody to help. Please trust me. I won’t let anything bad happen to you. Can you believe that?”

The line was silent as Ruby seemed to contemplate what I said. Finally, she answered. “Right now, you’re all I have, Dani. You’re the only hope I’ve got unless I get a chance to escape.”

“Not a hope, sweetie,” I assured her. “I’m sending you a sure thing. But don’t make them hurt you by trying something crazy. Somebody is getting you out of the auction site safely.”

“Okay,” she answered, her voice reflecting a spark of faith.

I knew she had no real reason to believe in anyone, and she had no reason to trust. I had no way of showing her that not everybody wanted to exploit her, or hurt her, except by showing her that some people were worth putting her faith into.

I hung up and then approached Jett. “I need you to be a hero tonight,” I informed him. “Please. I need your help.”

He frowned at me. “I’m always willing to help you, but I’m nobody’s hero.”

“You will be tonight. I need you to work your way into Dark Satisfactions and help a friend. It’s not just a sex club. They’re human trafficking, Jett. At least in Ruby’s case.” I was fairly certain there were more, and we needed to close down those businesses completely.

I explained to my brother and Marcus quickly, knowing I was short on time.

“Jesus, I hate this prick even more than I did before,” Jett cursed. “I’m on it. I’ll get her out of her situation, and then we can go to the authorities.”

I put my hand gently on my brother’s arm. “She’s scared, Jett.”

I’d just told him about Ruby’s history, but I wanted him to understand that she might not trust him.

He nodded. “I doubt she’ll be threatened by me. I limp, and she could outrun me right now if she wanted to.”

I hugged him, so damn grateful that he had such a huge heart. “Be careful.”

He hugged me back and then looked at Marcus. “Take care of her,” he warned his friend.

“No worries about that,” Marcus affirmed.

Jett only took a moment to pull everything together and he was out the door.

“He’ll be fine,” Marcus assured me. “He’s probably one of the smartest guys I’ve ever worked with in any capacity.”

“But his injuries are still going to be a disadvantage,” I argued.

“Less than you think,” Marcus drawled. “He might limp, but he’s pretty damn strong. And sometimes brains are more important than brawn. I need you to focus on what we’re doing. Jett will be fine.”

I nodded. “I’m ready.”

“Not quite yet,” he denied, reaching his hand into his pocket to pull out a chain and a pendant.

I didn’t stop him when he went to drape the piece of jewelry over my neck and then pulled my hair from the gold chain.

“What’s this?” I asked uncertainly, fingering the cameo pendant.

Marcus flipped the pendant over. “Since Becker is a paranoid prick, I don’t doubt that he isn’t going to let you keep your cell phone for pictures. This is a backup.”

“Are you telling me this actually takes photos?” The pendant was relatively tiny.

He demonstrated how it flipped open, where the button to take photos was, and how to use the device, and then closed it again. “It takes very good photos as long as you do exactly what I told you to do.”

“How is that possible?” I questioned.

“I’d tell you, but then I’d have to kill you,” he said in a mocking tone.

I shot him a tremulous smile. “Highly classified?” I asked.

“Actually, yes. And so is this.” He pulled something else out of his pocket.

“What?”

He slid a simple beaded bracelet over my wrist. It was plain, and like the pendant, it was nothing flashy. I was guessing it was supposed to be nondescript so as to not draw attention.

He adjusted the beads carefully as he said, “Touch the beads, but don’t twist them.”

I put my index finger carefully on the cool, artificial stones. “One of them is smooth,” I mused.

Marcus quickly explained how the pepper spray device worked. It was pretty simple. With a quick, powerful twist to the smooth stone, a high concentrate of pepper spray released into an assailant’s eyes if one’s aim was good.

“Aim well, and make sure you have an escape route,” he advised. “If you don’t move your ass, you’ll end up getting some of it yourself. Don’t do it in an enclosed area or if you can’t get away.”

I marveled at some of the nifty gadgets that Marcus had access to. “Got it,” I acknowledged. “What? No matching ring?”

“No, but I have earrings,” he mentioned casually, drawing a pair of plain black stones out of his other pocket.

I was wearing a pair of dangle earrings that matched my white shirt, but he motioned for me to take them off, and I ridded myself of them quickly.

“Do I want to know what these do?” I asked as I threaded both wires through my pierced holes.

“Press the inside button on either one of them and the signal comes directly to me,” he explained. “And you’d better use it at the first sign of trouble,” he grumbled.

“Panic buttons?” I asked.

“Don’t wait until you panic,” he advised. “Once you think he might be onto you, push the damn button. I’m going to be on your ass anyway, but I need you to signal me if there’s a problem.”

Nice as all these tiny tools might be, what really touched me was the fact that Marcus Colter looked worried.

“Hey,” I said softly. “I’ll be okay.”

His staunch expression didn’t soften as he snaked a hand around the back of my neck. “You better be. Don’t take any chances, Danica. Promise me.”

I glanced up at him, meeting his tumultuous gray eyes. My heart skittered as I saw the strain on his face. “I won’t. I promise.”

“I must be fucking crazy for helping you do this,” he rasped.

“I’m crazy,” I corrected. “You’re just watching out for me.”

“That seems to be a job I do well,” he said hoarsely as his head lowered to capture my mouth.

I couldn’t help but sink into his hard body, opening for him as he demanded my submission. I wrapped my arms around his neck, losing myself in his strength for a moment, allowing myself to feel.

I’d steel myself for my meeting with Becker as soon as Marcus let me go, but for just an instant, I needed to feel protected, and the only one who could make me feel less alone was the man who was holding me like he never wanted to let me go.



Chapter 14



Marcus

It had been the worst kind of torture to watch Dani get in her car and drive away.

Yeah, I was following behind her in a very ordinary sedan, but I knew I had to keep my distance, and I hated it.

I should have pulled her out of this whole thing. What in the hell was I thinking?

I'd questioned my own sanity several times over the last few days. Usually, I'd use whatever contacts I could get with a threat to national security, and Becker was definitely dangerous because of his enormous funding of the rebels.

But *she* was no ordinary contact.

And the way I felt leaving her at all vulnerable was downright insane.

I didn't want her with Becker. I didn't even want her in the same city with him. Yet, I needed her to help me gain access to critical information, intel that would finally bring Becker down for good.

Jett had made incredible progress by "digging" for dirt on Becker on the dark web, but not quite enough to present to the necessary departments to take him down. Hell, Becker had so many offenses it was going to be hard to figure out *who* was going to handle *what* on government offenses. But that wasn't my concern.

I wanted to bust Becker on so many levels, but the sense of protecting our country from foreign governments or terrorists was ingrained in me. What I wanted the most was to take Becker down for good. After that, I wanted the whole damn organization that had harmed Dani to cease to exist and not be a threat to our goddamn planet.

Everything I was insisted that I let Dani get access to intel. I'd been using any method necessary to impede anybody who wanted to harm the US in any way. However, as a man, I was having one hell of a time watching Danica be some kind of sacrifice.

"I'll get her out quickly," I muttered, still trying to convince myself that I was doing the right thing.

In theory, one person for a nation was a fair trade-off.

But that wasn't at all how I felt right now.

If Becker caught Dani in action, or doubted her loyalty to him, he'd kill her without a second thought.

"Fuck!" I exploded, slamming my hand on the steering wheel. My only consolation was that I had various departments of the government to back me up, even though I *technically* didn't exist for the CIA.

I wasn't an employee.

Nobody had a file on me.

The information I gained was put in investigative files, and my involvement quickly disappeared.

Just the way I liked it.

However, I'd helped enough starched shirts in the government that I could still call on plenty of people for help, including the FBI and some of my fellow CIA agents.

I watched as Dani pulled into a driveway ahead of me, and I stayed back, parking some distance away and cutting my headlights.

Now wasn't the time to second-guess myself. I needed to keep my head on straight and think like a spy.

She had every available gadget I could get my hands on to both protect her and help her stay undetected. Yeah, I broke out in a sweat as I watched her exit her compact vehicle in a skirt so short that she had to yank it down to cover the cheeks of her ass. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate the look. But I didn't want any other guy looking at Dani the same way.

As usual, she'd done her makeup way too heavy, but she was just as damn gorgeous as ever, and I coveted her, wanting to keep her all to myself.

As she disappeared into the luxury home, I had to admit to myself that she was the gutsiest female I'd ever encountered. She'd never flinched in trying to bring the world international news, and she hadn't broken under the captivity of men who had tormented her in every way possible.

Now, she'd thrown herself into danger again. Maybe she was wary, but she was determined.

The moment I'd met her, I'd wanted to nail her against the wall. But the way I craved her now was at a whole different level.

Mine! She's fucking mine.

It took all I had not to get out of my damn car and go find her, take her away from anything that could possibly harm her.

Problem was, she was the most stubborn woman on earth.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel impatiently as I felt my cell phone vibrate in the pocket of my jeans. I'd dressed for comfort and mobility, trying to make myself as ordinary as possible.

My eyes never leaving the house, I pulled out my phone and answered it. "Colter," I said abruptly into my cell.

“Marcus? Everything okay?” Jett asked, his voice solemn and low.

“Just got here,” I replied. “She’s in. I’m just keeping the house under surveillance.”

“Damn,” Jett cursed. “I hate this.”

“Me, too, buddy,” I admitted. “How is it going there?”

“Good thing I’m worth billions,” he scoffed. “Gaining entry into the club is exhaustive and expensive. But I’m in. The auction starts shortly.”

“Whatever it costs, I’ll pay you back,” I told him with no reservations. Ruby was Dani’s friend, and we had to get her out of harm’s way.

“Oh, hell no. If I’m going to buy a virgin, I’m paying for it,” he replied. “I’m doing this for my sister. And maybe a little bit for Ruby, too. Jesus. She hasn’t had the easiest life.”

Dani had explained to me and her brother how Ruby had gotten into being a victim of human trafficking. “They always pick the most vulnerable,” I told Jett in a disgusted tone.

“Yeah, well, it’s bullshit,” Jett said adamantly. “What sick individuals do this shit?”

“People like Becker and his minions,” I drawled.

“They don’t just sell virgins,” Jett replied. “There’s all kinds of illegal crap happening here, and I don’t think the majority of women who are present here, are here on their own free will or working willingly.”

“The place has to get shut down,” I told him. “Just get Ruby out without looking obvious, and we’ll let law enforcement handle it. Get as much information as you can.”

“Ruby will probably have to testify,” Jett said in a regretful tone.

“She will. But hopefully she’ll be so happy to escape that she’ll do it.”

Jett hesitated before he said, “I gotta go. Take care of my sister.”

“I always have,” I reminded him.

“You have,” he acknowledged. “Probably more than she ever realized. I have a feeling you’ve always had an eye on her in some way or another. Even when she didn’t realize it.”

I wasn’t fessing up to his claim, even though it was true. “Maybe,” I answered noncommittally.

“Does she know how you feel?” Jett asked.

“What?” I asked innocently. “She’s like a sister to me, too.”

Jett snorted. “I call bullshit, buddy. But you can sort that out later if you’re not ready to deal with it. Just keep her safe.”

“I plan on it,” I responded grimly.

We talked a minute or two more, shaping up our plans for later, and then hung up to focus on our objectives.

Jett was taking Ruby back to my condo, but if everything went smooth, I’d have Dani’s ass on my private jet as soon as she was out of Becker’s place. I had people moving our belongings to the airport and onto my plane.

I didn’t want her anywhere in the area when all hell broke loose.



Chapter 15



Dani

I would be lying if I tried to convince myself I wasn't afraid.

But while I was trying not to flinch under Becker's intense scrutiny, I did have the security of knowing that Marcus was outside, waiting for a signal if I should get in trouble.

I was determined that this man I'd been tailing for weeks wasn't going to slip away from prosecution. He was a traitor to my country, and pure evil in every other respect.

I tried not to show my aversion to him as he roughly stroked my cheek. "I've been waiting for this night, Dani."

I'm sure he had been. The night that he'd left me black and blue was still fresh in my mind every time I looked at him. Women were nothing more than disposable trash to him.

"Me, too," I murmured, not being totally untruthful. I was, in fact, waiting for him to get his ass nailed against the wall.

I was grateful for the tools Marcus had given me since Becker had taken my keys and my handbag the minute I walked through the door and stashed them somewhere unknown. He was paranoid, but it had been a move I wasn't expecting.

"I need to go freshen up," I told him as I rose from my place beside him on the couch. I had to find my way around his home, and just being so close to the man who had cuffed me so hard I still had a faint outline of black-and-blue marks on my face made me slightly nauseous.

“Hurry up,” he insisted in an annoyed tone. He stood up and took off his suit jacket as he added, “I’ve got plans for you.”

I smiled weakly as I shuddered, not even wanting to know what his plans might be.

“Be right back,” I answered sunnily.

He jerked his head to the left. “The bathroom is at the end of the hall. Stay out of the other rooms.”

“Okay,” I answered meekly as I turned away and scurried down the hallway.

I closed the door to the toilet loud enough so he could hear it, and then leaned back against it.

Damn! How was I going to get anywhere when he was watching me like a hawk?

“I can do this. I can do this,” I whispered over and over like it was my mantra.

Problem was, I’d seen the ugly, violent side of Gregory Becker, and it had scared the hell out of me. I’d seen the same expressions when I’d been brutalized by my kidnappers.

Lifeless.

Dead.

Emotionless.

Where there was no conscience, there was no hesitancy to hurt, maim, or kill.

I had no doubt that just like my jailers in the Middle East, Becker enjoyed causing people pain and misery. In fact, I was pretty sure he excelled at it.

I pushed myself off the bathroom door, catching my reflection in the mirror as I moved. My white blouse was nearly transparent, but I was wearing a white sports bra underneath. I looked like a hooker trying to attract a man with

layers of makeup and bright-red lipstick. The frightened expression in my eyes just wouldn't do. No matter what, I wasn't cowering down to Becker. I was playing a role that would get me what I wanted.

I turned my back on the mirror, my mind racing. I thought I'd seen what looked like a home office on my way to the bathroom. It made sense that it was located on the ground floor.

The home was beyond pretentious, the décor opulent but decorated with gold, a fact that told me that he felt like he had something to prove. Everything I'd seen so far was downright gaudy and over-the-top.

I flushed the toilet to make it sound like I'd actually used it, and to drown out noise as I gently twisted the doorknob and opened the bathroom door enough for me to escape.

I didn't hear anything from the living room as I slipped into the open door I'd seen on my way to the bathroom. Moonlight bathed the room in dim light.

I rushed to the desk and flipped on the small desk lamp, listening for any trace of footsteps coming down the hallway.

Quietly, I opened all the desk drawers, looking for any sign of paperwork.

Dammit! Nothing!

I was ready to give up when I spotted a bookshelf next to the desk. My heart was pounding as I saw a large ledger that seemed out of place right next to some of the classics.

I pulled out the large, untitled book, and then opened it on the desk.

Bingo!

It was a book of transactions, illegal money being sent through various shell companies and offshore accounts to hide the income from his darker businesses. I didn't think; I just

started using the tiny cameo Marcus had given me to get records and names of the companies.

I moved as quickly as possible, snapping as much information as I could in a short period of time. The amounts and dates weren't as important as capturing the names of the companies and the accounts.

I was amazed by the fact that Becker hadn't even bothered to try to hide exactly where the money was coming from. It listed the human trafficking, prostitution, and drug deals right in the ledger.

Maybe he was too arrogant about covering his tracks. He's obviously done it for years. Nobody has even dug deep enough to follow the money.

I was just replacing the large book when I heard footsteps.

"What in the fuck are you doing in here?" Becker said, his tone furious.

I moved my hand slowly. "I was just admiring your book collection. You have some great classics," I lied, thinking quickly about how to cover myself.

Dammit! I'd almost made it out before he came after me.

"I told you not to go anywhere except the can," he said in a surly tone.

I cringed as he moved to my side, the fury in his expression terrifying.

"What else were you doing? Bitch, are you spying on me?"

"Of course not," I answered in an innocent tone. "I just like books."

"So you just happened to stumble in here?"

"Yes."

"Bullshit," he exploded. "I hate liars, and you're not telling me the truth."

“I am. I swear I am,” I answered in a pleading tone. “Why else would I be here?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me?” he demanded.

I startled as he grabbed a large hunk of my hair, yanked my head back, and I felt cold metal against my face. Out of the corner of my eye, I verified what I already knew. He was holding a gun to the side of my head.

“Tell me!” he bellowed. “What in the hell were you looking for?”

“Nothing. I just stopped in here because I could see the bookshelf.”

I swallowed hard, trying not to think about the weapon aimed at my head.

Keeping his grip on my hair and the gun close to his target, he pushed me in front of him. “Move,” he said in a menacing voice, pushing me to set my body in motion.

“Where?” I asked, trying not to let my fear take over.

“We’re going to take a fucking ride. I don’t trust you here.”

My heart was racing as I stumbled over my high heels in front of him, his grip on my hair feeling like he was tearing it from my scalp.

Marcus! Signal for Marcus.

There was no way I was getting away from Becker’s death grip. If I released the pepper spray, there was no guarantee he wouldn’t shoot me on the spot.

The only way to get help was to bring Marcus into the mess I’d just created. But I was terrified he’d get wounded or end up dead. There was no way for me to warn him that Greg had a gun.

I hesitated as Becker pushed me outside and toward his vehicle in the driveway, trying to think about how I could pull myself out of the situation without getting Marcus hurt.

As ordered, I climbed into the passenger seat from the driver's side, his weapon trained on me the entire time.

"You'll pay for your betrayal, bitch. Nobody snoops around me and lives to tell about it," he bragged as he got into the driver's seat.

"Greg, I wasn't snooping. I was just looking at your office," I said, trying to reason with a madman.

"I told you what to do, and you had to go digging around. I said to stay out of the other rooms. You brought this on yourself."

Sweet Jesus! He was so paranoid that I wasn't going to be able to reason with him.

He pushed the button to start the vehicle, and I started to contemplate whether or not I should push the panic button for Marcus's backup.

By now, he'd probably seen us. The house was sheltered, but if he was on the street, he might already know what was happening. If he came into the situation knowing Becker had a weapon, he might be more careful.

My thoughts instantly dissipated as the lights in the car came back on, and Becker was temporarily diverted by a man standing next to the open driver's side door. The gun that he had trained on me wavered for a moment, and it only took me seconds to figure out why.

"I'm taking this vehicle, asshole. Get out or I'll blow your head off," Marcus growled in a low, agitated tone.

Like Becker, Marcus had a gun, and it was leveled at Becker's head.

Like I was watching in slow motion, the weapon moved from being aimed at me and started toward Marcus.

With a twist of a stone, I hit my mark with the pepper spray in my bracelet. A wounded howl escaped from Becker's

mouth as I grabbed for his gun.

Marcus moved faster than me, grabbing Becker's shirt and hauling him out of the vehicle, and then slamming him to the ground as he intercepted Becker's gun in the process.

He hopped into the driver's seat and sped away, making sure he had the keys in the vehicle before he left Becker's bellowing figure on the ground.

I fumbled for the control for the windows, opening the one on my side as fast as possible because of the discharged pepper spray.

I panted for breath, my heart galloping as I realized that I'd escaped with Marcus.

"What are you doing? Where are we going?" I asked in a panicked tone.

"Not far," he answered in a clipped tone.

We stopped a few blocks away from Becker's house. "Are we getting out?"

"Get into my sedan. Go!" he said in an urgent tone.

I stumbled out of the luxury sports car and to the vehicle I'd seen Marcus driving earlier in the day. I'd barely closed the door when he stepped on the gas and sped away from the abandoned vehicle.

I didn't speak as Marcus drove. My body was still shaking, and I was still trying to figure out what the hell had just happened.

Marcus had appeared out of nowhere, and I'd definitely been looking for any sign of him when Becker had brought me outside. Everything had happened so fast. All I'd been able to process was the fact that Becker was trying to shoot Marcus. I'd acted completely on instinct when I'd released the pepper spray.

Finally, I said in a husky whisper, “You’re safe. We’re both safe.”

“I could have used some help before you used the chemicals,” Marcus said tightly. “If you were in trouble, why didn’t you signal for me?”

It was a reasonable question. I just wasn’t sure how to answer.



Chapter 16



Jett

I'd done some crazy-ass shit in my life, but what was happening before my eyes was one of the weirdest things I'd ever seen.

I watched as a naked woman left the stage, obviously happy that her body had fetched a high price, judging by her smile. Apparently, not *all* of the women here were victims, but I had no doubt many of them were either brainwashed or coerced into the situation.

Jesus Christ!

What female would want to be sold like their value was nothing more than monetary? Probably not many.

I'd done some bad things in the past, usually to save lives or keep people from getting hurt. I'd done plenty of illegal hacking. I'd even used a gun to fire on terrorists when I was working with Marcus for PRO. I might have been the tech guy, but every one of us had been skilled with weapons of all types.

But I'd never—in my wildest damn dreams—imagined the atrocities that were happening here at this club tonight.

My body stiffened as I realized the grand finale of the evening, the virgin sale, was about to occur.

I heard men talking in hoarse whispers as a naked woman stepped into the spotlight on stage, and then my heart completely stopped.

The woman looked young, probably barely drinking age—if not younger. I had no doubt that this was Ruby, and I already knew she was almost twenty-three years old, but she looked like she could be straight out of high school. Her body was youthful and curvaceous, her pussy obviously shaved to make her look even younger than she did naturally.

For fuck's sake, even her hair was in two ponytails at the side of her head, and she was completely devoid of makeup—not that she needed any.

She was beautiful in a totally earthy way. But her expression was what was making my heart do strange things that it had never done before.

Her head was held high, but I could see the fear in her eyes. I'd gotten a table near the stage, and I could see her swallow hard as she tried to gather up the courage to keep her chin up.

She was trembling, even though she was trying to wrap her arms around herself to try to stop it and hide it. When the man holding onto a thin chain around her waist knocked her hands away from her body to put her on better display, I had to keep myself from jumping onto the stage and strangling the bastard.

The MC's voice sounded over the loudspeaker. "What would you give to get this pretty young thing into your bedroom? She's one-hundred-percent virgin, and ready for whatever you have planned for her. Or maybe you prefer a dungeon where you can torment her slowly before you take what you paid for. A prize like this is worth any price. She's afraid, and I have a feeling she'd put up a good fight. Imagine punishing this one for being a naughty girl. Gentlemen...let's start the bidding."

My gut rolled. *Jesus!* I had to admit I'd been around the block, and I could be as kinky as the next guy. But this was *way* too difficult for me to be comfortable observing.

The young woman looked hopeless, and I was almost feeling her pain and humiliation.

I tried to catch her eyes, but she was still staring straight ahead, her head up like she was trying to salvage her pride.

I frowned as I looked closer, noticing that she was biting her lower lip.

Protective instincts surged up inside me, the need to save this woman from further pain and humiliation so strong that I had to force myself to stay in my seat.

The bidding was ridiculous, a slow torture that I almost wanted to just end by offering any price for her.

Stay cool. Stay calm.

I looked around the room, watching some rich old men practically salivating to get their hands on the woman gracing the stage.

Hell, I wanted her, too. I wasn't innocent. But I was more desperate to rescue her than I was to fuck her at the moment.

I didn't want a terrified female.

All I wanted was a woman who actually wanted *me* now that I was damaged goods. But Lisette had already taught me a lesson about wanting more than I could ever have.

I was damaged, and there was no way in hell I was ever going to find anybody who didn't cringe at my scars. Hell, sometimes they even made me look away from the injuries on my own body.

I signaled to the auctioneer—if I could really call him that—to up my bid.

I wasn't leaving the building without Ruby.

The bidding hit six figures, and men started to slowly drop out with disgruntled looks. The amount of money being offered was nothing to me. I had more money than I could spend in plenty of lifetimes. I didn't care if we hit seven figures or beyond.

I had no more than placed my bid when I suddenly looked up and met Ruby's gaze. Her steady, tormented expression made me want to just scoop her up, wrap her in something warm, and take her home with me.

I knew something about her life, things that Dani had shared with me.

She was a woman who'd never really known kindness.

She was a woman who'd usually been cold, defenseless, and alone on the streets.

She'd been hungry.

She'd been frightened.

And by God, I was going to show her that not *all* people were bad.

Ruby deserved a whole lot better than the crappy hand that life had dealt her.

I sent her a conspirator type of wink and a grin. I was rewarded by the first hint of emotion from her dark and tortured eyes.

For just an instant, I saw a glint of hope pass across her face before it fled just as quickly.

Dani hadn't told Ruby exactly how she'd help her, but I was hoping she'd understand that the last thing I wanted was to hurt her.

Finally, Ruby was going once.

Going twice.

Sold—to the gentleman in the front row.

I breathed a damn sigh of relief.

Ruby was coming home with me.



Chapter 17



Dani

“Marcus, is this big rush really necessary?” I asked as I fastened my seat belt for takeoff in his massive jet.

“Yes,” he answered simply.

Okay, he was angry at me for not signaling for him to come and help me. Maybe I should have explained that I was terrified that something would happen to him, but I’d made up some stupid excuse instead.

He hadn’t liked my explanation.

So, he’d been nearly silent while he’d driven like a bat out of hell to the airport.

Honestly, the whole carjacking idea had been brilliant. The ruse and the lack of connection between me and Marcus had been perfect. I’d already handed over the tiny camera to a government official who had taken it when we’d arrived at Marcus’s jet, and left almost immediately to have the information analyzed.

If they could get what they needed, Becker *would* go down. If Greg thought Marcus was simply a carjacker or a thug, then he wouldn’t really get twitchy about the fact that someone might be onto him. He’d be most likely to believe the criminal who’d taken the car and the woman inside the vehicle had gotten cold feet when they found me in the car and both of us had bailed. Or at least that’s what I hoped he’d believe. It would give law enforcement time to do what was needed to arrest the jerk.

I knew we were headed to Rocky Springs. I'd heard Marcus talking to the pilot. "I don't even have a home in Colorado," I informed him.

"You'll be staying with me," he replied in a voice that allowed no argument.

"Do I have a choice in this decision?"

"No," he answered flatly.

"And will you continue to be pissed off at me?"

I could have mentioned that I had a sister in Colorado, one I could most certainly stay with when I arrived. However, I could tell now wasn't the time to be argumentative with him.

Marcus was...well...*he was Marcus*. That meant he was bossy as hell, which could be incredibly annoying. But it was hard to get angry at a man who kept saving my ass.

"Most likely," he grumbled.

"I wish you *wouldn't* be," I shared. "You saved my life tonight."

"Again," he said in an ornery tone.

Granted, he *had* saved my butt twice now. And I was grateful. But I didn't want to spend the whole trip to Colorado with him in a mood. "Thank you," I said, putting a hand on his arm in gratitude.

"Don't thank me. I'm beginning to think it's my goal in life to make sure you stay alive."

The fact that he cared enough to keep saving me was actually humbling. Marcus was one of the richest men in the world, and he had a lot on his plate. He didn't have to worry, but he did. It said a lot about his heart and the kindness that was buried underneath his sarcastic and gruff exterior.

"I didn't want Becker to hurt you," I said in a rush. "I was afraid because he had a gun. I didn't want him to take you unaware and have you end up injured or dead because of me."

Marcus was silent for a moment before he said, “If I ever let somebody take me unaware, I’d be dead by now. For God’s sake, Danica, it’s not like I didn’t know that asshole didn’t have more than one gun.”

“I couldn’t risk it,” I told him as I removed my hand from his arm.

“You should have,” he argued. “*Christ!* I’d never get over it if something had happened to you. It would have destroyed me.”

My heart tripped as I realized his anger was all for me, generated by his fear for my safety.

Oh, Marcus. You’re a better man than you know.

Maybe he was formidable, but the guy had a good heart.

“I was willing to take the risk,” I reminded him.

He turned his head and pinned me with his steel-colored stare. “I wasn’t,” he growled. “I hated this whole damn idea from the beginning. Did he hurt you?”

I shook my head slowly, mesmerized by the volatile emotion I could see in his gaze. “No. Not really.”

I could feel the jet leveling off, and the seat belt sign went off.

“I have to use the bathroom,” I said as my head began to spin.

I fumbled with the restraint and then stumbled to my feet.

Marcus steadied me. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “I’ll be fine.”

I used the seats for balance as I sprinted toward the toilet. Once I’d closed the door, I lowered the toilet seat and sat down.

I’d gotten there just in time.

Sweat beaded on my forehead, and my heart began to race until I was gasping for breath. A loud sound started to buzz in my head, and tears flowed down my cheeks. I put my hand on the counter by the sink, willing the helpless feeling to go away.

But it seemed like it lasted forever.

“Danica? Dani? What the hell is the matter?” I heard Marcus say, his voice muffled by the ringing in my ears.

I was swept up into my own dizzy, heart-pounding, breathless world for what seemed like an endless period of time before I started to come back down again.

“Dani!” Marcus called to me, demanding that I respond.

Problem was, I couldn’t say anything. Not until my body belonged to me again.

I put my trembling hand on my thigh, leaning over to get some air. I felt like I was choking, but I knew I wasn’t.

Finally, the fog started to clear and I started to suck in some deeper breaths.

“I’m making an emergency landing,” Marcus said emphatically. “I think we need to get you to a hospital.”

As I came back into my body, I protested. “No. Don’t.”

He was kneeling in front of me, holding a cold cloth to my sweaty forehead. “I don’t know what’s wrong—”

“I know. Just give me a minute,” I pleaded. I started to take deep breaths and straightened up, taking the cloth from his hand to wipe my perspiring face.

“You’re getting some color back. Jesus! You were as white as a sheet. What happened?”

“Panic attack,” I answered. “I haven’t had a full-blown attack in a long time. I guess what happened tonight just brought it on. It won’t kill me.”

I was mortified that I'd fallen apart in front of him, but I'd forgotten that the bathroom had an entrance from the bedroom where he'd come in.

"You have panic attacks?" he asked gently. "Since the incident a year ago?"

I nodded as I started to feel steadier, my heart regaining its regular rhythm. "I thought I was over them. They were pretty bad after I got back to the States a year ago. Through therapy, I've slowly recovered from my PTSD and anxiety. But I guess I'm not quite there yet. I'm sorry."

He took my hands into his as he told me, "Don't be sorry for something you can't control. If the only thing you're left with is an occasional panic attack, you're doing well. Jesus, Dani. You've been through hell and back. Why can't you give yourself a break?"

"It helps to be busy," I said weakly.

"You can stay occupied with something safe," he said in a graveled voice. "How are you feeling now?"

"I'm okay now. I hate not having control when they happen. I feel like I can't breathe, I get really dizzy and disconnected, and my heart races about a million miles a minute. It's embarrassing, and I feel so damn helpless. My last experience with this was months ago. I've learned how to deal with them, but I guess it's still going to happen occasionally, especially if I'm stressed out."

"I'll help you. Just tell me what you need and I'll get it."

He sounded so sincere that it made my heart clench. "It's over. I'll be okay. I just need to take a shower and get out of these clothes."

I was fairly certain that the amount of sweat that had come from my body was making me stink.

"What can I do?" He started to pull my foot from my ridiculously high-heeled shoes.

“You’re already doing it,” I answered with a smile.

“What?”

“Help me get out of this outfit,” I requested.

He tossed the shoes aside, straightened up, and then pulled me gently to my feet. “I’ll stand by in case you get dizzy again.”

“I don’t think it will happen again. I don’t get them that close together. But I’d still like your help.” My hands were shaking as I started to unbutton my blouse.

Marcus batted my hands away and started to confidently release the buttons. “I’ll do it.”

“Will you take a shower with me, Marcus?” I wasn’t really suffering any aftereffects other than being tired. Now that I’d released the stress I’d been burying, I was okay.

I’d learned through counseling that panic attacks weren’t going to kill me, but a lunatic almost had snuffed out my life earlier tonight. Maybe it was the reminder of how fragile life could be that made me want to reach out and grab exactly what I wanted.

“Why? You said you’d be okay,” he reminded me as he slid the blouse off my shoulders.

“Because I want you to,” I confessed. “You asked me if I needed anything. The only thing I *really* need is you.”



Chapter 18



Marcus

I wasn't sure I could see her naked and not want to fuck her.

Hell, I couldn't see her *clothed* and not want to nail her.

After she'd scared the shit out of me earlier tonight, and then just a few minutes ago while she was sweating bullets and gasping for breath, my need to be deep inside her was even stronger.

I hated the fact that she still had lingering effects from her time as a captive, but it was understandable. She'd been so damn brave, and I knew this latest investigation had to have affected her in a very big way.

I wanted to make her feel safe and protected.

Yet, I also wanted to see her coming for me.

She was offering, and I felt goddamn helpless to refuse. *But...* "Dani, I'm not going to take advantage of you right now. It's been a really stressful day. Our adrenaline is still running high."

I watched as she shimmied out of her skirt. "The way that I need you has nothing to do with adrenaline, Marcus. It's there. It's always been there. I've just tried to ignore it. But when I realized tonight that I could die in a matter of seconds, I understood that I have to stop being cautious sometimes. I have to ask for what I need."

She was right. Our instantaneous connection that had started years ago while we'd both been in hot spots had *always*

been present. I'd wanted Dani for a very long time, but we'd both chosen to ignore it. Hell, I'd gotten to the point where I couldn't control my desire anymore, and I was damn sick of fighting it.

She was my best friend's sister. Dani should be off-limits. However, I was unable to deny her right now. "I don't want you to regret this," I said honestly.

Grabbing the waistband of my jeans, she said, "I'd never regret *you*."

"This isn't going to be a fling for either of us," I warned. "We stay together and see where this goes from here. We aren't going to go our separate ways until both of us are ready."

"Okay," she agreed readily.

"We won't be able to go back," I warned.

"I don't care," she murmured as she released the most perfect pair of breasts I'd ever seen when she pulled the sports bra over her head and dropped it on the floor.

"Then fuck it," I rumbled, my eyes roving over her tight, curvy body that was now nearly unclad except for a pair of stockings and flimsy underwear. "I've never claimed to be a damn saint, and I certainly don't feel like one right now. If you want me, I'm yours."

"I want you," she answered almost immediately.

"Then God help us both," I said, scooping her up into my arms so I could carry her to the bed.

"I probably stink," she cautioned. "I was all sweaty."

"You don't," I assured her. She smelled as sweet as sin to me.

The angst between the two of us dissipated, and I could think of nothing except how damn right it felt to have her body against mine, skin-to-skin.

I lowered her onto the bed gently. I had to make sure I didn't move too fast. "Have you been with anybody since those bastards raped you?"

I was pretty sure I knew the answer to my question, but I had to ask her anyway. If I was the first for her since the kidnapping incident, we had to take things slow and easy.

"No. I didn't want anybody else. I'd only been with two guys before, and nobody since I was raped by the terrorists. Now, the only man I want is you."

Shit! What in the hell could I say to that? I was glad I was the first guy she'd wanted in a long time, but I was also wary that she wasn't yet ready to be with someone.

I shucked off my jeans and dropped them onto the floor. "Dani, are you sure you're ready for this?"

My dick was already plenty hard, but it got even firmer as her eyes roved over my body like she wanted to devour me.

"I'm beyond ready. Please, Marcus," she pleaded in a vulnerable tone.

I dropped beside her and then hovered over her as I met her needy gaze. "Jesus! You're so damn beautiful," I told her hoarsely.

I shuddered as she put her hands on my chest to stroke the muscles there and then moved to my biceps.

I stopped for a moment, just absorbing the feel of her hands on my body. I'd wanted this for so damn long it was almost surreal. Finally, I lowered my head to kiss her.

The minute she opened to my demand, I *knew* I was fucking lost. I'd lusted after this woman for so damn long that my body was tight from holding back.

I took everything she gave me, and then I asked for more.

Finally, I lifted my head and buried my face in the side of her neck, feasting on the tender skin as I heard her moan. All I

wanted to do was explore her beautiful body, make her moan louder.

“Marcus,” she said in a breathless voice as I latched on to one of her nipples, determined to make sure she was spoiled for any other guy except me.

Mine! She was always supposed to be mine.

I listened and watched her reactions carefully, not wanting to put her into a panic. There was no way I was *not* going to savor this experience, but my dick was urging me to hurry it along.

“This feels so good, Marcus,” she said, her voice quivering.

“It’s about to get a whole lot better,” I replied, straightening up for a moment so I could remove the thong she was wearing.

She helped, lifting her ass as I dragged the small piece of silk from her body.

Damn! One wrong move and her ass would have been hanging out of her short skirt. All she’d have had to do was bend the wrong way.

“I have a love/hate relationship with these,” I rumbled, tossing the panties off the bed.

I heard her stifle a laugh, and I was pretty sure she knew exactly what I was thinking as she said, “Do you want me to take off my stockings?”

They came almost to the top of her thighs, and were secured by a black, lacy band.

“No,” I decided. “Leave them.”

I ran a hand up each of her thighs, loving the hell out of the silky feeling of her stockings, but it was so much better when I hit her satiny-smooth skin.

She jumped, but she didn’t shy away as I lowered my body between her thighs. My heart was racing as I explored the small band of sensitive skin above the stockings with my

thumbs and then edged up to plunge a finger through her silken heat, parting her folds, only to be met by a wetness that made me catch my breath.

Christ! She really does want me.

Her pussy was wet, moist, and more than ready for my insistent cock. But I ignored it. What I really wanted was to taste her, devour her juices until I was satiated.

I heard her whimper as I buried my face between her thighs, tasting every inch of her sweet pussy with a flat tongue and subtle pressure to her clit.

“Oh, God. Marcus. Yes.”

Her desperate words were followed by a hard grip on my hair, urging me to make her explode with pleasure.

I took my time, slowly ramping up the tension in her body by giving her more and more stimulation to the tiny bundle of nerves that I knew would get her off.

Her hips rose, the move done solely to try to get her satisfaction. She ground her hips against my mouth, silently urging me to give her more.

I got drunk on the taste of her, and the erotic movement of her hips grinding up with every stroke of my tongue.

She was desperate as she panted, “Make me come, Marcus. Please, make me come.”

I didn't want to stop, but I could hear the strain in her voice, and the last thing I wanted was to confuse her. There was time enough later for delayed gratification. For now, I just wanted to give her everything she wanted.

I focused on the little pulsating nub, my tongue stroking over it hard, allowing Dani to fly a little higher.

Her grip on my hair intensified, and my mouth grew rougher and rougher as I heard every catch of her breath.

Come for me, Dani. Come on. Let go.

I stayed on her clit, but I used my other hand to penetrate her sheath, using one finger to open her, and then two to fuck her.

She was writhing beneath my mouth, her breath coming hard and fast, when I felt her body tighten. A strangled scream left her lips when I felt the inner walls of her channel clamping down on my thrusting fingers.

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” Her chanting was incoherent, and I’d lost any other words she might have spoken. All I could hear loud and clear was her acceptance of her oncoming orgasm.

I was sweating bullets as I imagined her tight, slick sheath taking my cock.

Her muscled sheath clamped down on my fingers, and her body began to tremble as she rode her climax full force. Her back arched off the bed, and her hips ground up, her fingers clutching my hair with a death grip.

I lapped at the released stream of juices as they flowed from her pussy, savoring every single drop.

“God, Marcus. What in the hell was that?” she exclaimed as her body started to spiral down.

I moved up her body slowly. “I believe it’s called an orgasm,” I informed her.

“I’ve *had* orgasms. I give them to myself. That was... different.”

I tried like hell not to think about her getting herself off. It was a picture that would now probably be perpetually ingrained on my brain.

I plopped beside her as she caught her breath, moving one of my slick fingers to her lips. “This is what you taste like,” I growled, watching as her mouth opened and then clamped onto my finger.

My dick twitched, imagining that sensual mouth taking something other than one of my digits.

She sucked on my finger for a moment before releasing it. “Amazing,” she said simply.

I smoothed her damp hair from her face. “Yeah, you are,” I replied, deliberately misunderstanding her meaning.

She was so responsive.

So ready for me.

So damn fearless.

I kissed her forehead as she recovered her breath and then flopped onto my back. Every instinct in my body wanted her, needed to fuck her and make her mine.

But my protective instincts intervened, saying maybe I’d pushed her as far as I dared for now.



Chapter 19



Dani

My eyes were closed, and I felt like my body was so sensitized that I could feel every breath I took entering and leaving my lungs.

What Marcus had done, and the way he made me feel, had completely blown me away. I'd entered a world of pure, sensual pleasure, and it was a space that I never wanted to escape.

"That was..." Hell, I had no words. I wanted to tell Marcus how I felt, but how do you say thanks for something you never knew existed? "Orgasmic," I finished in a hoarse whisper, knowing that what I'd said was lame, but not knowing how else to describe it.

I had some previous sexual experience, but nothing had ever felt like *that*. The pleasure had been so intense that it was *almost* painful. The fact that Marcus had seemed to enjoy every moment of the experience had made it just that much more powerful.

I slowly recovered, and then noticed that Marcus was flat on his back.

Rolling to my side, my head propped on a pillow, I asked, "Is everything okay?"

His arm was covering his eyes. "Yeah. I'm good."

He didn't sound *good*; his voice sounded beleaguered.

"What's wrong?" I pressed.

He rolled to his side so we were face-to-face. His fingers threaded into my hair as he said, “Nothing is wrong. Seeing you like that was fucking amazing.”

Marcus was being honest. I could see it in his eyes.

“Then why are you waiting? I’m recovered, and there’s nothing I want more than you,” I told him hesitantly.

He let out a masculine sigh. “I still remember how scared you were when I kissed you on my jet right after you were rescued. Dani, I don’t ever want to see that look on your face again.”

I propped myself onto my elbow. “Wait a minute. You think I’m scared?”

He moved with me, putting his hand beneath his head. “Aren’t you? You still have panic attacks, Dani, and you haven’t been with a guy since you were gang-raped.”

A tenderness for this man beside me flowed over my body and landed in my heart. He was afraid for me, worried about me not being ready to have sex again. “Marcus, I wouldn’t have started this if I didn’t want to finish it. I’m not afraid of you,” I informed him in a gentle tone.

“You should be,” he grumbled. “The crazy-ass way I want you scares the hell out of me.”

I knelt beside him, running my hand down his muscular abdomen, and then reaching inside the elastic waistband of his underwear for what I really wanted. “I can tell that you want me,” I teased, stroking my fingers up and down his rock-hard shaft.

“Jesus Christ, Dani, knock that shit off before you find yourself underneath me and at my mercy,” he growled, his jaw clenched tight.

I tugged on his boxer briefs, pulling them off his body by sheer will, because he didn’t help me one bit. His body tensed as I straddled him and then speared my hands through his hair

and lowered my body down on his, savoring the way we felt skin-to-skin. I kissed his forehead before I put my lips next to his ear. “Fuck me, Marcus. Do it before I go crazy. I *want* you deep inside me. I want to watch *you* come.”

I knew he was fighting his desire, and I was determined to make sure he lost. His concern for me touched my soul, but there was no need for it. I wasn't a fragile flower, and I had never, ever been afraid of *him*. Maybe time hadn't healed all of my wounds, but I wasn't afraid of sex or Marcus. Really, all I wanted was sex *with* Marcus.

Maybe if it had been anyone else but him, I might feel differently. But it was *him*, the guy my body desperately craved, and I wasn't fresh from the rescue anymore.

I knew what I wanted.

I knew what I needed.

My problem right now was trying to explain to him that I wasn't going to be afraid.

No way was he going to leave me again like he had in the restroom.

I sighed as his fiery skin warmed my body. I ground down against him, hoping he'd finally get the message, while my lips trailed along his cheek and then to his mouth.

I kissed him hard, letting him know I couldn't get enough of him, and my body caught fire as he finally responded. His fingers dug into my hair, pulled me closer, and then explored my mouth with a desperation so thick that it was nearly palpable in the air around us.

When I lifted my head, I warned him, “If you don't fuck me, I'm *taking* what I want.”

“Do it,” he rasped. “There's no way I can resist you. I have no damn idea how I've done it for this long.”

I wasn't about to wait any longer now that I knew that he was with me. I slid back, positioning myself to take him inside me, and then lowered myself onto his cock. "Oh, God, Marcus. I've wanted this for so long," I whimpered as my muscles stretched to take all of him.

"Keep going, baby. Take me. All of me," he demanded.

I smiled as I completely seated myself on him, my body screaming with happiness as I finally got what I needed.

Marcus's hands slapped onto my hips, gripping them hard as he thrust his hips up.

I sat up and put my hands on his shoulders, moaning as I felt him straining into me.

"Don't hold back," I pleaded, knowing that I needed him so desperately that slow and easy wasn't going to cut it.

He eased my hips up, and I caught his rhythm. Beads of sweat formed on my face as he gave me more, our bodies meeting with a satisfying slap every time he guided me down again.

"Marcus," I whined helplessly, my head falling back, my body demanding the fulfillment he was promising.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he grunted, his powerful biceps flexing as he kept thrusting into me.

Harder and harder.

Over and over.

Both of us working our bodies together like they belonged this way.

Something hot slithered through my belly and started to ripple outward.

"Come for me, Dani. I'm not going to be able to hold back much longer," he rumbled, one of his hands coming off my hip to slide his fingers to the place where we were fused together.

The first rough stroke over my clit sent me reeling.

The second made me climax, my orgasm hitting me like a fast-moving bullet train. “Marcus. Marcus.”

I couldn’t do anything except call out his name, my body shuddering as I completely imploded.

I fell forward again, and our slick bodies slid together as Marcus held my hips, his cock pummeling into my sheath with an urgency I could feel even as I reached my peak.

“Dani. Baby,” he groaned in a sexy, throaty voice. “Fuck!”

My channel was clamping down on his thrusting cock, and I savored the expression on his face as I dove down to kiss him, knowing I was milking him to a hot release.

His embrace was rough and hard, a passionate expression of the way we were both letting go and just feeling ourselves go up in smoke.

I welcomed his heavy, masculine groan as he released himself inside me, my entire body trembling as my climax hit its peak, and then started to wind down again.

“Holy fuck!” Marcus cursed, wrapping his arms around my body to hold me safely against his chest.

I was panting, and my heart was galloping so fast it was almost impossible to discern the separation of the beats. One flowed into the other, and a profound sense of peace like I’d never known washed over me. “I’ve needed that for so long,” I said in a stunned whisper.

Maybe I’d tried to hate him.

Maybe I’d had to constantly remind myself that I knew he was a dog because of what I’d thought had happened with my sister a decade ago.

Maybe my attraction to him had always been there, but I’d never acknowledged it.

But thinking back honestly now, I couldn't remember a time when I *hadn't* wanted Marcus, no matter how much I'd tried to deny it.

He wasn't safe, and he probably wasn't what I *should* be needing. That was probably why I'd never allowed my conscious brain to think about the heat that flamed between the two of us.

I might have buried it in anger and resentment, but what had just happened had been a very long time in the making. The desire he could conjure up inside me just by being close to me had *always* been there.

"I know, sweetheart," he answered huskily, his hand stroking over my hair in a comforting motion. "Me, too."

Of course our attraction was mutual. It wouldn't have been as explosive if it wasn't, if we didn't both have the same chemical reaction to each other.

Having sex with Marcus was like playing with fire, but considering what had just occurred, I was willing to risk getting burned.

"I didn't use protection, Dani," he said remorsefully. "I was so far gone that I didn't think about it. I've never done that before."

"I'm clean," I reassured him. After all, I had been gang-raped over and over, so he had a right to be concerned. "And I'm on birth control. After what happened, I'll probably always stay on the Pill or some type of contraceptives."

"Hell, I'm not worried about you," he said in a coarse tone. "But you didn't ask about me."

"I don't need to," I told him.

"Why?"

"Because I know you well enough to realize that if you weren't clean, nothing would have happened without a

condom,” I explained.

“I’m not a saint,” he denied. “But I’m clean. I’ve never had sex without a condom before, and I get checked regularly.”

“So I’m your first?” I teased.

“My only right now,” he said.

My heart turned. I’d love to be Marcus’s only for a while. “I stink,” I told him with a sigh. “But I’m not sure how I’m going to get up and into the shower. I think my legs are too weak.”

He sat up and moved to the edge of the bed, taking me with him with one arm wrapped around my body. Then, he lifted me up, forcing me to put my arms around his neck as he stood.

“What are you doing?” I squealed.

“Taking my weak-legged woman to the shower,” he answered nonchalantly.

I squealed again as he hefted me higher into his arms and proceeded to take me to the shower.

I laughed until we finally got into the water. After that, Marcus and I were quite busy concentrating on other pleasurable activities.



Chapter 20



Dani

When we arrived in Rocky Springs, I did end up staying with Marcus. Not because he ordered it, but because I *wanted* to be with him.

Somewhere between my panic attack and our touchdown, I'd realized that no matter how much I tried to insulate myself, there was no guarantee of happiness. Honestly, I'd probably realized that truth during the time I'd been a prisoner of the rebels. I was going to have to make a play for what I wanted in my life.

And if I didn't at least try to make Marcus part of my future, I was only going to be going through the motions.

I was in love with him. *Completely. Totally. Irrevocably.*

And if we couldn't be together for the rest of our lives, I'd cherish every moment I had with him.

"I have to admit, I thought we'd end up fighting over you staying here with me," Marcus said as he started stripping off his clothing in the bedroom of his Rocky Springs mansion.

We'd caught almost no sleep on our journey back to Colorado, and we were both ready to get some rest.

"It's almost three a.m.," I reminded him. "And I'm feeling magnanimous."

He grinned at me from across the room. I'd just slipped on a nightshirt from my suitcase, and he was taking off his clothes so fast that it was nearly mind-boggling.

I'd had a brief tour of the house before we'd retreated back to the master bedroom.

Still smirking, he asked, "And why is that?"

"Because I got what I wanted," I purred, smiling back at him. "That does tend to mellow me out."

"What a coincidence. I got what I wanted, too, and I didn't have to throw you over my shoulder to get you to my place when we got home."

"I *want* to spend time with you," I confessed. "I don't want to crash at Harper and Blake's house. They haven't been married that long."

"Then it's a good arrangement for both of us," he drawled, coming toward me as naked as the day he was born. "Because I want to be with you, too."

Even though I was exhausted, I couldn't help but admire his amazing body and the way he moved. He reminded me of a predator stalking prey.

"Come with me," he insisted, holding out his hand.

"I already did that on the plane," I answered in a teasing voice, and then placed my hand in his.

"Smart-ass," he answered, sounding more amused than irritated.

"Where are we going?" I asked curiously, letting him lead me to the French doors that I assumed went out to a patio since the master bedroom was located on the first level of his house.

His home was huge, but it managed to be massive without being incredibly pretentious. I loved the high ceilings and the modern décor, something that seemed congruent with Marcus's personality.

"You'll see," he answered mysteriously, swinging open the doors. "I haven't had time to do this for a while."

The large patio area was enclosed, but the top of the outbuilding was open. “This is beautiful,” I told him in an awed tone.

The gardens were colorful, but tasteful, and the flowers were gorgeous.

When he finally stopped walking, I swept my eyes lovingly over the incredible hot springs in front of us.

I’d grown up near Rocky Springs, but the Colters had the large majority of hot springs in the area. The resort featured pools both large and small, but I was betting on the fact that each sibling had built a house near a private pool. Hell, I would if I owned their property.

I could smell the minerals, but the scent was pleasant, and highly tempting. He’d kept the natural look, the pool sided by rocks with ledges and a lovely waterfall.

“Are we getting in?” I asked hopefully.

“I thought maybe you could use it to relax,” Marcus answered off-handedly, trying to pretend like he wasn’t being the most thoughtful guy on the planet.

He slipped in first and then held his arms out for me to jump down beside him. Without a second of hesitation, I leapt into his arms.

“Oh, God,” I moaned as the warm water hit my body. “This is incredible.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he answered.

He took a spot on an underwater rock and pulled me to sit between his legs.

“Did I really scare you when I had that panic attack?” I asked curiously. God knew I’d tried to run off and hide it. I knew watching me freak out probably wasn’t a very pleasant sight.

“Yes,” he answered simply.

“I haven’t had one in a long time,” I explained as I looked up at the stars. “But I hate the fact that I never know when and how it’s going to happen.”

“Why now?”

I shrugged. “I think it was probably the stress of dealing with Becker. And before you scold me, I wasn’t going to back out. So don’t even go there.”

“Well, shit,” he grumbled.

I knew he’d *so wanted* to go there, telling me he should have done something different.

“Marcus, it was something I had to do. I’d been holding Becker’s name in my mind for months. When I finally remembered that the terrorist had mentioned him as a source of their funding, I knew that stopping him was something I needed to do.”

His arm tightened around my waist. “Why? You could have just taken the information to the authorities.”

“Then what?” I questioned. “I couldn’t prove anything. You told me he’d been successfully running dirty businesses for a long time, and he’d never been arrested. This was personal to me. A lot of people have been hurt or killed because he funded the rebels and had some kind of delusion that he could rule his own territory on the other side of the world.”

“I understand,” he finally conceded. “I might not like it, but I get it.”

I returned to our original subject. “I’m in counseling. I have been since the whole thing happened. I never miss an appointment because I want to feel normal again. If necessary, I do a video chat with my therapist. I’ve resolved a lot of things, but there’s some areas where I’ll always be different than I was before it occurred. I thought my panic attacks were gone. Maybe they were, and this is just a setback.”

“Can you take it easy for a while?” he grumbled.

I smiled into the darkness. “Maybe.”

“What else is different?” he asked.

I sighed. “Everything and nothing. I’m still the same person, but I feel like I just view *life* differently. I know how easily it can end now, and I don’t want to take anything or anyone for granted.”

“I want you to stay safe,” he said huskily. “My heart can’t take any more of your adventures right now.”

It was amusing that a man like Marcus was talking about his supposed vulnerabilities. “Someday, I’d like to go back to the Middle East just to prove to myself that I can. I want to know that my courage is greater than my fear.”

“It is,” Marcus rumbled. “Believe me, it is.”

“I never used to be afraid of anything,” I said with a touch of sadness for the woman I used to be. “Now I have to fight to get rid of my fear.”

“You’re the bravest woman I know,” Marcus argued. “Have you ever heard the quote that goes something like this—*I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it.*”

“*The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear,*” I said, finishing the quote. “I think Nelson Mandela is responsible for that version of a very important point. But sometimes I’m not sure I’m actually triumphing.”

“You *are* conquering your fear, Dani. You *have* succeeded in spite of what happened. It’s only been a year. Be patient with yourself,” Marcus said in a hoarse voice.

“I try,” I answered. “I really do.”

“It’s okay not to be perfect,” he stated. “I’ve known competent businessmen who have crumbled during a hostage situation. Hell, they never want to leave their house again.”

“I’d go nuts,” I confided. “But I’d really like to have my life back. I’d like to have *me* back.”

“You’ll get there,” Marcus said. “Hell, you’re already ballsy enough to make me nervous.”

I let out a small laugh. “The great and powerful Marcus Colter? I doubt that.”

“I’m still just a man, a guy who can’t stand to see you struggling with everything that occurred. It never should have happened in the first place.”

I leaned back against him, my heart clenching from the remorse in his voice. “It *did* happen, but it isn’t going to keep ruling my life,” I answered in a determined voice.

“You’re fine just the way you are,” he said assertively. “Everybody is afraid of something.”

“What are you afraid of, Marcus?” I asked curiously.

He was silent for a minute before he answered, “Someday, I’ll answer that question. But I can’t right now.”

“Okay.” I wanted him to share things with me, but not unless he wanted me to know. For now, I was good with just enjoying our time together.

I had no idea how many days we had before he left to travel for business, but I was going to relish every moment we had.

“So what kind of recommendations did your counselor make? I trust he or she is knowledgeable about your particular situation.”

“She is, and we take things one issue at a time. Her advice was to get a dog,” I told him jokingly.

“Why?” Marcus asked, obviously confused.

“I told her I’d like to set down some roots, even if I still have to travel. I mentioned to her that one of the worst parts of traveling is being alone. I’ve always wanted a dog, but I never

got one because my life was too chaotic. There would never be enough time for me to spend with an animal.”

“You like dogs?” he asked.

“I love them. All breeds. I haven’t met a canine that I didn’t like.”

“So get one.”

“We’ll see,” I answered noncommittally. “I can’t get one until I decide where I want to put down those roots, and how much I plan on being home.”

“What else did she suggest?” Marcus questioned.

“A very long vacation. Catching up on my reading and movies, or anything else that doesn’t involve traveling for work.”

“Good advice,” Marcus said approvingly. “You’ll find everything you need right here.”

Honestly, I had no idea how long Marcus and I would hang out together, but I wasn’t against taking my vacation in Rocky Springs. I just hoped I didn’t end up regretting it.



Chapter 21



Dani

It took a few days for us to get the news that Gregory Becker had finally been arrested. Some of the information I'd been able to obtain had finally tied him to a number of crimes.

Ruby was fine, staying with Jett in Florida for now to give her statements as a key witness to the human trafficking charges.

It made me feel good to know that at least something I'd done in the last year might prevent Becker from hurting anybody else. I would have preferred to move quicker, but Marcus was always there to remind me that I'd been responsible for putting the last nail in Becker's coffin, no matter when it had happened.

The bastard was finally off the streets and unable to finance rebel troops.

I'd quickly finished my investigative exposé and turned it in to my old boss, giving my previous employer a pretty big scoop. The article had just been published as the news about Becker had come out today.

I was in Marcus's office, a room that was masculine and stuffy, but reminded me so much of the man who owned it. Strangely, over the last few days, I'd started to like his extremely dry humor and previously annoying arrogance. He'd finally decided he didn't *have* to wear a suit and tie when he wasn't working, even if it *was* a workday. And if he was somewhat aloof and haughty, they were qualities he'd needed

to do the things required of him by his company and his country.

He could be teased out of his autocratic tendencies, and he occasionally even had the ability to laugh at himself.

Okay...the laughing at himself wasn't all that common, but had happened a few times in the last couple of days.

One important thing I'd discovered is that no matter how hard he blustered, Marcus loved his family, and he cared about far more things than he'd ever let on. I couldn't say that I'd learned *all* of his secrets, but I *was* on to him. There was so much more to him than what a person could see with a casual acquaintance. He just usually chose not to show what was beneath the surface.

Maybe he had no idea how to really relax, but then, neither did I. We were learning together, seeing what it felt like to just take some time off. Granted, we used a lot of that time having sex, but we'd also played a few games of chess, caught up on movies we hadn't seen, and I was experimenting with cooking. Yeah, maybe I wasn't ready to become a chef, but Marcus's mom had stopped by yesterday to help me fix a casserole I'd totally screwed up. Luckily, she was willing to give me a hand learning basic cooking skills. Surprisingly, I was learning to enjoy cooking and baking now that I had some time and was in one place for more than a day.

I scrolled down the full-page piece I'd written on my laptop, satisfied to see my name as the byline. "It's live," I told Marcus excitedly.

He was behind his massive oak desk, dressed casually in a gray polo shirt and a pair of jeans. I was seated on the comfortable leather couch in his office with my computer.

"I know," he drawled. "I'm looking at it now."

Smart-ass. I should have known he'd find it before I did. It was kind of sweet that he was actually looking. "It was good," I stated without any kind of arrogance. I was a good writer and

reporter, and it was no great accomplishment that I was able to push out a good piece when I had a decent story.

“It was fantastic,” he corrected. “You’re talented, Dani. I’ve always known that. Your correspondent stories were always brilliant. You have a knack for taking the perfect approach to any subject.”

I looked up from my laptop and saw his broad smile. My heart skittered as I absorbed his compliment. It meant a lot coming from a guy like Marcus. He wasn’t the type of person who threw out praise very often. “Thanks,” I said, smiling back at him. “I’m glad it’s all over.”

“What are you working on now?” he asked curiously.

I shrugged. “Nothing important. Mostly my personal journal.”

“And what do you journal about?” he pushed.

“Whatever I feel like writing,” I answered. “Right now, I’m writing down my bucket list.”

“Don’t you think you’re a little young for that?” he asked with a frown.

I shook my head. “Not at all. I thought I was going to die when I was a prisoner. It’s funny what happens when you feel that way, and how many silly little things you regret not doing.”

“Like what?” he asked huskily.

I’d gone to college right after high school, and then spent the majority of my adult life chasing stories in the Middle East. “Silly stuff,” I evaded.

“Tell me,” he insisted. “Maybe I’ve done some of them and I can tell you if doing any of those things are worth it.”

I evaluated my list. “I’ve never built a sandcastle on the beach. I’ve never actually spent any time on the ocean. It was one of the many things I thought about while I was a captive.”

“Never done that,” he replied. “Never spent much time on the beach. I spent plenty of time flying over them, though.”

“I’ve never been bungee jumping or zip-lining,” I continued.

“Me neither,” Marcus admitted. “Both of them are pretty dangerous—”

“Says the man who spies as a hobby,” I finished.

“Makes more sense than jumping from a bridge counting on a big rubber band to save my ass,” he grumbled.

I bit my lip to keep from smiling. “I think I can cross out the ‘learn to cook’ item off the list. At least I have been trying.”

“What else?”

“I’ve never been drunk, not even a little,” I confessed. “I was too busy in college trying to do everything I could to try to get hired as a journalist when I graduated.”

“Done it. You aren’t missing anything,” Marcus rumbled. “Hangovers suck.”

“Do you think going into the hot springs naked qualifies as skinny dipping?” I asked, my eyes on my list.

“In the water. Outside. Naked. Yeah, I highly recommend that one, especially if you’re there with a beautiful redhead who makes you crazy.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “I was with a handsome, dark-haired man who drives me insane. Will that work?”

“For now,” he said agreeably. “Go ahead and remove that one. Tell me the rest.”

“They’re personal,” I said hesitantly.

“You don’t want to share?” he inquired, sounding slightly hurt.

“Okay,” I agreed. “But they’re kind of silly.”

“Read them,” he demanded.

“I’ve never kissed a man in the rain. I’ve never had a guy who really loved me. I’ve never been proposed to. And I’ve never had a child.”

“You want kids?” he asked in a low, inquisitive baritone.

I shrugged. “Someday. Yeah. I never really thought about it until I got kidnapped. I guess those are the things you think about when you know your life might be over so early. Did I make the right choice? Did I put enough effort into relationships? Did I love my family and friends enough?”

Marcus leaned back in his leather chair, his entire attention on me. His eyes were intense, as though he was thinking about what I said.

“I can’t say I know how you feel,” he finally admitted. “But I understand reconsidering some of your choices in life.”

“Aren’t you doing exactly what you want to do?” I asked with surprise.

“Not always. I’m not as close to my family as I’d like to be, and I have no idea what I would have done for a career if I’d felt I had a choice.”

“You didn’t want to run your father’s conglomerate?”

He shrugged. “I never thought about it. I was the oldest, and our father died young. He was killed in a terrorist attack—in the wrong place at the wrong time in the Middle East.”

My heart clenched. No wonder he wanted to keep Americans safe. His own father had been a victim of unstable circumstances in a foreign country.

My mother and Marcus’s had been friends. I knew his father had died, but I’d been too young to understand where or how it had happened back then.

Marcus continued, “As far as running Dad’s conglomerate...I guess it was always assumed that I would. I

was groomed for it, and it never occurred to me to argue. I know my mother would have wanted me to do whatever made me happy, but there wasn't really anything else I wanted to do."

"So you don't regret doing it?"

"I don't. I've become damn good at what I do. But I do regret the distance it's caused with my family. Hell, I don't even connect well with my own twin anymore. I told myself that I was doing it to protect them in case somebody found out about the government work I was doing, but I think I pretty much isolated myself because I knew I'd miss them if I didn't."

"Does that work?" I asked.

"Not really. It just makes the empty feeling easier to handle."

"Traveling around the world is hard," I commiserated. "Sometimes I'd be gone for months at a time on assignment. I missed my family a lot."

Marcus shrugged as he replied, "It was great when I was fresh out of college. But just like you, I wonder what I missed by not being here at home."

"No long-term relationships?" I asked. I couldn't even remember Marcus being linked with any one female other than my sister. That hadn't exactly been long-term, and that incident—as I now knew—had been a case of mistaken identity.

He shook his head. "No."

"Because you were traveling," I commiserated.

"I don't think that was the problem, actually," he corrected.

"Then what was it?"

He shot me a sharp look and then glanced back at his computer again. Still staring at the screen, he answered, "I

guess I just never met anybody worth bothering to stay at home for until now.”



Chapter 22



Marcus

It wasn't that I didn't *know* I was completely fucked—I just didn't want to admit it.

I was hiking with Dani the day after she'd spilled some of her *list* to me, suddenly realizing that I didn't miss being on an airplane or in a foreign country at all. It was the first time I'd actually been stateside for more than a few days, and I wasn't the least bit edgy or eager to get back on my private jet and fly away.

I held her hand tightly as we both navigated down a rocky incline, worried as hell that something would happen to her. *Jesus!* I think I'd be fucking upset if she so much as broke a damn fingernail—not that she had long nails to break.

After everything she'd been through, all I wanted to do was protect her, make sure nothing bad ever happened to her again. I still had nightmares about seeing her right after her brutal captivity, and it wasn't something I wanted to see ever again. Hell, I didn't want to see her unhappy in any way.

Maybe she didn't see herself as strong, but she was one of the gutsiest women I knew. Honestly, she probably should have died while she had been held captive, but she'd pulled through it, and was still willing to risk her ass again trying to take down a man who was hurting other people. Danica's capacity to care about someone other than herself was probably both a curse and a blessing. Sometimes I almost wished she'd be more selfish, but then she wouldn't be Dani.

“I’m okay, Marcus,” she said breathlessly beside me. We’d reached the bottom of the rocky area and had our feet on solid ground. “You can stop squeezing my hand. I’m not going to fall.”

I released the pressure on her fingers, not even realizing I was holding them hard enough to cut off her blood supply. “Sorry,” I rumbled. “I wanted you to have support if you fell.”

“I won’t fall,” she promised, shooting me a happy, glowing smile as we trekked along beside each other.

Her grin made me feel like somebody had punched me in the gut. That’s how I knew I was screwed. All she had to do was show any sign that she was happy and it had me thinking about how I was ever going to let her go.

Fuck that! She’s not going anywhere!

The woman needed somebody to keep her out of trouble, and I was more than willing to volunteer for the job.

We were so much alike, yet so damn different. Neither one of us had ever put down permanent roots and let them grow. What I’d told her yesterday was the truth. I hadn’t ever found anybody who made me want to slow down traveling.

Until her.

Until now.

Her sadness over things she might have missed if she actually *had* died made me want to help her experience every one of those items on her list. Sadly, I wasn’t much help in telling her what was worth missing and what wasn’t. My life had been as career-focused as hers.

Every moment I’d spent with her had been worth whatever I’d missed in my business life. I’d been overseeing my responsibilities from home, and very few things had needed my personal attention. My conglomerate had so much upper and middle management that they didn’t constantly need me

anymore. Everything ran just fine without me racing all over the planet.

Problem was, now that I'd experienced how good it felt to start being part of my family again, and I had Dani with me, I was afraid I'd grow to like the contentment way too much.

I was a loner.

I never stayed in one place for very long.

Hell, I wasn't even sure what I'd do with myself if I wasn't always on the go.

Right now, my focus was on getting Dani to relax and just be happy. She'd jumped out of one bad situation and into the next way too fast. There had been little time for her to recover, and it didn't surprise me that she'd experienced a panic attack after going so long without them.

I might not be the perfect guy to teach her how to relax. I wasn't exactly *Mr. Calm and Happy*. But I knew one thing... nobody cared about her well-being more than I did.

"Are you okay?" Dani asked quietly.

I shook myself out of my thoughts. "Yeah. I'm good."

"You were frowning," she pointed out. "And you looked like you were deep in thought."

I shook my head. "Nothing important."

Just me making a life plan for you in my mind!

Jesus! She was a grown adult. It was none of my business what she did in the future. We'd helped each other achieve a common goal: getting Becker put away for good.

Unfortunately, somewhere along the way, I'd stopped seeing her as just a cooperative journalist. Hell, I probably had *never* looked at her as just a reporter. There had *never* been a day when I hadn't wanted to nail her, and today was no exception. But there was a hell of a lot more than just sex

between the two of us. We'd established a kind of intimacy that I'd never experienced with a woman before.

That was how I'd come to the conclusion that I was downright screwed, and I wasn't sure that I cared.

Being with her felt too damn good to worry about how involved I was becoming. But I probably knew, deep down inside, that I might end up regretting it. However, even knowing that I might end up completely alone and pissed off wasn't enough to deter me.

"It's raining," I informed her, suddenly feeling the light sprinkle that may or may not have been falling for a while.

"It feels good," she answered. "It was getting hot."

We were both dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. I'd donned a pair of underused hiking boots while Dani had slipped on sneakers for our jaunt.

"At least it's not storming," I replied. There was no thunder or lightning, and Dani was right. It had been getting warm.

"We're almost home, right?" she asked curiously, not sounding the least bit concerned.

"Almost," I agreed. I stopped in the woods, causing her to halt with me. "But it reminds me of something. It's on your list."

She looked confused for a moment, her puzzled expression and questioning eyes looking for clarification.

I nudged her backward until her body came into contact with the trunk of an enormous pine tree.

"Time for that kiss in the rain," I explained in a husky voice. "It was on your wish list of things you'd never done."

God, I loved the way she smiled and tilted her face up to absorb the raindrops falling from the sky before replying, "Yes, it is," she answered. "An experience you said you didn't know about yourself."

I shrugged. *What in the hell did I know about romance? I had quick fucks. I didn't get emotionally involved.* “It could be interesting.”

She wrapped her arms around my neck. “We could try it,” she told me suggestively.

When she swiped a bead of rain from her lips with the tip of her tongue, I nearly lost it. My cock strained against the denim material of my jeans as I grew transfixed by a pair of tempting lips that I couldn't resist.

“Make it happen,” I insisted, bracing my hands on the massive tree trunk, one on each side of her head.

I wanted *her* to initiate the embrace. I had no fucking idea what I'd do if she didn't because there was no way I was turning back now.

I needed her too damn much.

Watching her eyes, I could almost see her brain working as she contemplated exactly what to do.

Kiss me, dammit!

For one long moment, I waited for her to act, my heart nearly galloping out of my chest as we simply stared at each other, both of us wanting the same damn thing.

Finally, she threaded her hands into my damp hair and pulled my head down.

Desperate, I met her halfway.



Chapter 23



Dani

Our lips met in a frenzied madness that I'd come to expect from Marcus, but I certainly hadn't gotten used to the emotions.

As usual, he took control almost immediately, and I opened for him with a reckless abandon that I couldn't deny.

Marcus was my weakness; the way he devoured me like I was the only woman in the world he wanted was way too tempting for me.

I moaned as his tongue swept into my mouth with a demanding strength that overpowered my senses.

I wanted more.

I needed more.

I was beginning to crave Marcus's touch in any way I could get it.

My fingers tightened on his hair, and I pressed my body against his, wanting to feel his hard body against mine. It was an obsession that I hadn't been able to tame. One that I didn't want to restrain because I knew he felt it every bit as much as I did.

By the time he lifted his head, I was frenzied. "Marcus," I murmured against his shoulder, feeling so vulnerable that I wasn't sure what else to say.

"You need me," he growled, lifting my head up so I could see the intense expression on his face. "Just like I need you."

We both feel it, Dani. It's not just you."

It was remarkable how he could put into words *exactly* what I was thinking, and then put me at ease with those feelings by confessing that he felt the same way. I wasn't comfortable with my emotions being so exposed, but knowing he felt the same primal, out-of-control instincts made it easier to handle.

"I know," I said in a muffled voice as I buried my head against his neck.

I *did* comprehend that it wasn't just me, but it felt better to hear him say it.

I was disappointed when he stepped back, but my displeasure quickly turned to astonishment as he stripped off his T-shirt and tossed it to the ground. "What are you doing?"

He grinned at me, a mischievous expression that I was starting to adore. Maybe because I was pretty certain Marcus didn't show this side of himself often.

"Getting naked," he explained.

"Here?" I squeaked.

"Right here. Right now," he confirmed as he started to lift my T-shirt.

"We're outside in the rain," I reminded him.

"I know." He tugged on my damp shirt.

I lifted my arms and let him strip the T-shirt off. It might be raining, but it was still summer, and it was plenty warm.

"What if somebody comes?" I asked.

"Somebody *is* going to come," he answered nonchalantly as he continued to strip off my garments. "Hopefully both of us," he added.

I actually giggled as I watched him fumble with my sneakers, and I finally took pity on him by just slipping them

off, and then stepped out of my jeans. “Feeling daring?” I asked as I used his shoulder to balance myself.

God, I loved this audacious side of him, his quiet confidence that he could do anything he wanted.

“Not really,” he answered as he set my clothing aside on the ground once I was naked. “We’re on my property. And I know that adding a little bit of intrigue gets you off.”

His fingers trailed up my thighs, and I gasped, feeling something akin to an electric jolt surge through my body. It wasn’t entirely comfortable, but it *was* arousing. “How do you know that?” I asked, already panting as his warm breath hit my naked pussy.

“Because I brought you to orgasm in a bathroom with somebody just barely out of sight,” he explained with infuriating calmness.

“I was—” My voice cut out, and I completely forgot about protesting as Marcus’s hands landed on my ass and his tongue speared through the pink flesh that was right in front of his face.

“Oh, God,” I moaned, and then drew a sharp breath as that slick mouth started to mercilessly devour me.

I plunged my fingers into his wet hair, needing some kind of balance and sanity where there was none. I came undone as Marcus meticulously started his sensual campaign to drive me insane.

He drew my leg over his shoulder, forcing me to use the tree to keep myself upright, and to grip his scalp harder.

When Marcus demanded, I was nearly helpless *not* to respond.

He delved deeper into my pussy, his mouth, tongue, and nose all stimulating my sensitized flesh. His tongue lashed at my clit, and I trembled with need. My nude body was getting pelted by rain, and the most beautiful man on the planet was

enthusiastically consuming my pussy like it was the only thing he needed for sustenance. It was the most erotic sensation I'd ever experienced.

I closed my eyes and drew my hands from his hair and then lifted them to grapple for a hold, finding it as I clutched the rough bark over my head.

Marcus teased, and then attacked. Savored, and then devoured with a hunger that seemed insatiable.

"Please make me come," I pleaded, my body quivering with the need to orgasm.

But he knew how to keep me from tumbling over the edge, to balance on a razor's edge, and it made me crazy. I'd start feeling the peak coming, and then he'd back off just enough to stop it from happening. Marcus was a master at forcing me into a state of desperate need.

"Marcus!" I screamed, not caring who might hear it. I *had* to come.

I tilted my head back as I felt the next wave building, Marcus burying his face in my pussy harder than he had before. Droplets of water from the sky continued to roll over my face and breasts, but I welcomed the sensual sensation. I was so lost in the pleasure of Marcus's mouth on my core that I couldn't think about anything else.

My fingers were gripped so tightly to the rough tree bark that I knew they were probably bleeding, but it didn't matter. I was completely focused on my need for release.

"Now," I demanded, but there was a needy tone in the command.

My climax washed over me so abruptly and forcefully that it was almost scary. I let out a moan of release and satisfaction, my body shaking as it was pounded by wave after wave of sensation. My orgasm was intense, and Marcus continued to lick and nip at the tender flesh, milking every ounce of

pleasure he could from me, seemingly ravenous for every drop of my juices he could lap from between my thighs.

I panted as I tried to recover, my legs weak as Marcus gently placed my foot back on the ground.

“I hate it when you do that,” I said breathlessly as he straightened and I wrapped my arms around him.

“No, you don’t,” he answered hoarsely. “You love it.”

Lord help me, but he was probably right. I loved the anticipation, and the enormous release that only he had ever given me. Or maybe I had some kind of love/hate relationship with it. I loved the climax, but I hated the torment.

I love you.

In my emotional state, I wanted like crazy to say those words out loud, but I bit my lip to keep from crying them out.

“Maybe I like it a little,” I admitted.

He pushed my hair back from my face. “You’re wet,” he said gravely. “Are you cold?”

“Are you kidding?” I snorted.

“Just checking.”

I ran my hands down his muscular back, and they glided smoothly over the slickness of his skin. “Fuck me, Marcus. I need to feel you inside me.”

He moved back enough to cup my breasts, teasing the saturated nipples with his thumbs. “I just want to watch you for a minute,” he replied.

My eyes rose to meet his tumultuous gaze. “Why?”

“Because you look so damn beautiful right after you come. I like knowing that I was the guy who put that expression on your face,” he answered covetously.

“Do I look ridiculous?” I asked hesitantly, not knowing that I had *that look*.

He lightly pinched my pebbled nipples and then ran a soothing circle over them slowly. I closed my eyes to absorb the pleasure/pain sensation as he repeated it over and over again.

He leaned forward and kissed my slippery lips before he said gruffly, “Hell, no. You don’t look ridiculous. You look like you’re fucking mine.”

I moved my hands up his back and speared my hands into his damp hair. I had the same possessive emotions that he did, but it still clawed at my heart when he said something that *sounded* like he was claiming me. It felt primitive and feral, and it made me need him with a ferocity that I almost couldn’t bear.

I reached down and fumbled with the zipper and button on his jeans. I needed him to fuck me so hard that I felt like we were somehow connected.

When my fingers finally brought out his enormous cock, I swiped the bead of moisture from the tip before the rain could wash it away and then brought it to my lips, watching his silver eyes glint with an emotion I couldn’t name as I put my finger in my mouth and sucked it right in front of his face.

“I love the way you taste,” I said in a sultry tone.

“Ditto,” he answered in an aroused, raw, masculine voice as he lowered his head and met my lips.

I savored the taste of us together as he ravaged my mouth. It was dirty, but so damn intoxicating that I was clamoring for more.

I’d never really tapped into the sexual side of me until I met Marcus.

My hands slid down to grasp his cock, feeling it pulsate in my palm.

We were both soaking wet, and the rain was getting heavier, but Marcus and I were too lost in each other to give a

damn.

When his mouth released mine, we were both panting. I savored the carnal look on his face as my palm slid over and over his cock in such a furious pace that he grabbed my wrist.

“Don’t,” he demanded. “I don’t have a lot of patience left anymore.”

“Then give us both what we need. Fuck me.”

“I don’t just need it, Danica. I have to have you,” he said fiercely, his eyes molten with desire.

“Oh, God, Marcus. Sometimes I don’t know how to handle this,” I said, gasping for air as I yanked my wrist from his grip and wrapped it back around his neck.

I felt consumed.

I felt overwhelmed.

And the razor-sharp desire that was eating me whole was so confusing.

“Then don’t think,” he rumbled, pulling back for a moment to turn my body until my back was against his front, and he took advantage of the position by continuing his assault on my breasts. “Just let me fuck you,” he added.

Every time his fingers tightened and released my tormented nipples, I let out a tiny gasp. His every touch was setting my whole world on fire.

He bent me over, helping me find my grip on the tree. His hands slid down between my thighs, urging me to part my legs more. I took a wider stance as I felt his eager cock press against the cheeks of my ass as he gripped my hips.

The ground around the tree sloped, putting him in the perfect position behind me. I waited, my head down and my drenched hair falling into my face again as I silently begged for him to fill me. The empty space inside me was demanding to be filled by Marcus.

When he surged forward, he wasn't gentle, and it was the first time he'd fucked me in this position. I wasn't used to the depth, and I squeaked as my tight muscles gave to allow him deep inside my slick sheath.

Right now, I needed Marcus's ferocity. He'd been careful and slow every time before today, probably because of my history of rape. But my body craved him, and there wasn't a single ounce of fear inside me. All I wanted was for him to take me hot and hard.

"Yes," I encouraged as my muscles relaxed and let him invade me until he was buried to his balls.

He leaned over my back, talking roughly into my ear, "Do you want it hard, baby?"

"Yes," I whimpered.

"Can you handle it?"

"Yes!" I was about to lose it. I needed him pounding into me before I went out of my mind.

He licked the raindrops off my neck, and then his teeth clamped down on my sensitive skin. It didn't hurt, but it made me even more desperate.

The heat of his chest on my back.

The way our skin slid together sensually.

The hot, dirty talk in my ear.

The sharp feel of his erotic nip to my neck.

All those things combined were a sultry feast. I shuddered with fierce desire. My entire being was clamoring for Marcus so badly I was ready to scream.

"Marcus. Please. Fuck me!"

He straightened up without another word, pulling back and then thrusting again with the same force.

I let out a sob of relief, my hips slamming back against him, my body greedy for every powerful surge.

He started a punishing rhythm that consumed both of us. There was nothing else except the meeting of our bodies.

I relished the pummeling of his cock inside me. It satisfied me like nothing else could.

There was only Marcus, and the pounding rain.

My hands were braced hard against the tree, and the rocking motion of my hips became more and more volatile as I felt the warm coil in my belly become an inferno.

“Harder,” I moaned helplessly.

He gave me *harder* as he growled, “You’re mine, Danica.”

“Yes,” I agreed in a fierce tone.

Right now, he owned my soul, and I didn’t care. In fact, I was ferociously glad he did.

The coil in my stomach started to unfurl, and I braced myself for the onslaught as the sensation moved between my thighs.

Marcus took a hand from my hips and adjusted his position as he kept up his brutal pace.

I flinched in surprise as I felt his finger probing between my butt cheeks, the digit finding my anus, and our completely wet state allowing it to slide in a fraction without pain. The tight hole stretched, but he didn’t invade. He just pumped in and out at a shallow depth, matching his finger to the pounding cadence of his cock.

I imploded, the new sensation causing a pleasure so intense that I couldn’t possibly stop myself from climaxing, even if I wanted to—which I didn’t.

This time, I let go, allowing my orgasm to wash over me as I completely embraced it.

“So good,” I cried. “So damn good.”

The muscles of my channel clamped down on Marcus’s pounding cock, milking him to his own fiery release.

I absorbed the sound of his tormented groan, wallowing in it. As much as he seemed to like to watch me after I came, I loved to hear those sounds of intense relief and pleasure come from his lips.

He exited my body after a moment or two, swung me around, and wrapped his muscular arms around me. He cradled me, crooning comforting, nearly incoherent words as he stroked my saturated hair.

I let myself drown in his sweet words, feeling like the most cherished woman in the world.

When he’d recovered his breath, he did up his jeans, and he scooped me up.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Taking you home. I don’t want you to cut your foot on rocks or other stuff on the ground.”

I was barefoot. He was still wearing his boots. “You can’t carry me all the way back to the house,” I protested.

He *did* haul me all the way back to his house in his arms.

Granted, it was closer than I’d originally thought, but it was still far enough that no normal guy could make that trek with my weight as a burden. But when he reached the door of his home, he wasn’t even winded.

I was beginning to learn that I should never tell Marcus he *couldn’t* do *anything*, because he was stubborn enough to prove that he absolutely *could*.



Chapter 24



Dani

“Are you going to eat all of that?” Marcus asked later that evening as we watched the news, cuddled up on the couch in his living room.

I smiled as I took another bite of the massive hot fudge sundae I’d concocted just a few minutes earlier. I could hear the note of longing in his voice as I leaned back against him. My back was resting against the front of his body, a position that had become our favorite when we were relaxing together.

“I planned on it,” I teased.

He didn’t answer, but I already knew he was hoping I’d share. I’d already figured out that he didn’t shun sugar and junk food because he didn’t like it. He did it strictly because of his rigid discipline to stay healthy and fit for his travels. It wasn’t that I objected. I understood that my obsession for junk food wasn’t healthy. I simply didn’t care. I ate healthy enough most of the time. A person needed some indulgences.

And lately, Marcus had been more than willing to allow himself some foods that were meant simply for pleasure.

My suspicion was that he could normally avoid it because he didn’t see it, but since I devoured it on a regular basis, he was tempted. His mother, Aileen, was a phenomenal cook and baker, so I was certain he’d indulged plenty as a kid.

He wasn’t nearly as snobby as he attempted to be about eating for pleasure.

Marcus could afford to consume what he wanted. He did one of the most brutal workouts I'd ever seen every morning in his home gym. I'd attempted to keep up with him, but had failed miserably.

According to Aileen, Marcus had loved chocolate when he was young, and I could tell that preference hadn't gone away. He just hid it well.

I pointed my spoon at the bowl. "This is really good. Are you sure you don't want me to make you one?"

"Nope. I'm fine," he answered.

Honestly, I think he liked junk food the best when he was eating *mine*. Maybe he could rationalize that because he didn't actually eat his own.

I sighed as I took another bite, the explosion of hot fudge and creamy French vanilla ice cream in my mouth absolutely perfect.

"I'd probably be willing to try a little of yours," Marcus rumbled, his low voice vibrating against my back as he looked over my shoulder.

I smiled broader, finally hearing him request to eat some of mine, just as I'd predicted. In fact, I'd been waiting for it.

"I'd hate for you to force yourself," I said in a false concerned tone.

"I wouldn't be," he contradicted quickly. "I really don't mind."

It was as close as Marcus was going to get to admitting he desperately wanted some of the ice cream masterpiece I'd made for myself. Since I knew he was going to want some, I'd heaped a lot in a very big bowl.

I turned, gathered the perfect bite in a spoon, and then held it up to his mouth.

“What do you think?” I asked after he’d quickly taken it from the utensil I’d offered.

He nodded. “You were right. It’s really good.”

I shared the entire bowl with him, amused that it was the only way I could really get him to eat something he enjoyed.

My body was exhausted from our earlier hike and subsequent passionate encounter outdoors. We’d showered when we’d come in out of the rain, and then had some dinner. Now that we’d slowed things down, I could feel the so-worth-it aches in my body from the volatile way we’d come together.

My fingers were scratched, something that Marcus had fussed over when he’d seen them in the shower. I was pretty sure he’d asked me at least ten times if they hurt.

They didn’t.

And I didn’t regret a single moment of experiencing my first kiss—and so much more—in the rain.

Marcus would *never* call himself a romantic, and maybe in all the conventional ways he wasn’t. But just the fact that he wanted me to live every experience I never thought I’d have a chance to experience was so touching that it didn’t matter if he was generally pragmatic. It made his thoughtfulness special and sweet to me.

I bent forward and put our empty bowl on the coffee table. I’d take it to the kitchen before I went to bed.

“I have to leave tomorrow,” he said unexpectedly, his voice decidedly unhappy as he wrapped his arms around me again, and I rested back against him.

It wasn’t like I hadn’t known his departure was inevitable, but it still stung...hard. “Where do you have to go?” I asked lightly, trying not to sound like the world was ending because it was time for us to part ways.

“I have to go to the Middle East. I wish I could put it off, but—”

“I understand,” I interrupted, not wanting to make a big deal out of the fact that he was going. Inside, I was brokenhearted, but I’d known who Marcus was when I’d chosen to spend time with him.

I can't lose it. I've always known this would eventually happen.

I guess I’d just hoped for more time, but honestly, it was going to hurt just as much *whenever* it happened.

“No, you *don't* understand, Danica. I wouldn't leave you right now if I didn't have to,” he grumbled.

I suddenly connected something that had happened after we showered. “Does this have anything to do with your conversation with Jett?”

He'd spoken with my brother at length in his office before finally handing the phone over to me when I came downstairs.

He let out a masculine sigh. “That's what's spurring my urgency, yes.”

“What happened?” I turned around to look at him in concern.

“It seems we're missing a few virgins,” he explained. “Ruby was locked in a room before the auction with two European females, apparently two women who weren't exactly willing participants. Ruby was auctioned off as planned, and as you know, she's safe with your brother in Florida.”

“And the other two women?” I questioned.

“They disappeared. They were never part of the auction. Your brother used his skills to track what happened to them. Ruby heard something about them being shipped to Syria, a gift for a rebel leader.”

I closed my eyes in horror. “Oh, God. If that’s true, they’re in trouble, Marcus.”

“I know. But I’m hoping they’re still over the border in Turkey. Jett found some possible leads.”

“Where did he track them to?”

“The same town you left when you decided to follow the teenagers.”

It was actually more of a village, and over the years I’d come to know a lot of the locals, and they trusted me. There was often press there, and the town housed a lot of refugees. My job as a journalist had been to report information on the refugee crisis and the status of the fighting in Syria. I knew that area in a personal way. The region also had medical staff from around the world volunteering to help treat the people who had fled to the border town to escape the fighting.

“I’ll go with you,” I decided. “I know you have more experience with spying than I do, but I know those locals. I speak Turkish and enough Arabic. I can help you get more information if somebody is hiding them.”

“Not happening,” Marcus answered flatly. “You need more time. You don’t want to go back there right now.”

“I do,” I told him fervently. “I need to go.”

Being back in the place that I associated with so much pain was integral to my recovery. I’d always known I had to go eventually. I’d wanted to conquer my fear, but I hadn’t gotten to the point where I was ready to return. Now that there were women in trouble, I was ready.

“You’re not going, Danica,” Marcus insisted. “*Christ!* You just got out of a bad situation. Now you’re ready to go risk your neck again?”

“Yes,” I said emphatically, my eyes clashing with his in a battle of wills. “Marcus, this is something I *have* to do. I’ve

always known I couldn't let what happened get the best of me. I can't let them win."

"The terrorists who held you captive are dead."

"Not to me," I explained. "I have to face that fear before it will go away. That town had nothing to do with what happened to me, but I connect it in my mind with the pain and fear of my capture and torture."

"Which is exactly why you're not going."

"That's why I *should* go. You'll be there with me, and I can help you."

"I can't do that," he answered in a voice cracking with emotion.

I could see the worry in his expression as I replied, "I'll be safe with you."

"I'd handcuff us together to keep you from running over the border if you think somebody is in trouble."

"I'm good with that," I replied, trying to cajole him into taking me.

"No."

God, he was stubborn. I knew he was trying to protect me from pain, but I couldn't be afraid forever. The thought of going with Marcus wasn't nearly as scary as going alone. "I won't be afraid. I'll be with you."

"*I'll* be fucking scared," he admitted with a growl. "You've been through enough, Dani."

"I have to go sometime, Marcus. And if I can help you, it's a perfect time. I'm not going to let those bastards win. I'm not spending my life being terrified of a region I spent plenty of my life reporting on. I lived with those people. I was there more than I was here."

"And it was *never* safe," he rumbled. "It's too damn close to the border. The towns in that region *aren't* always secure."

“Is anywhere safe anymore?” I asked. “Anything can happen anywhere in the world.”

“I suppose,” he conceded. “However, you don’t have to put yourself that close to the line of fire.”

“I’ll go eventually. You can’t protect me forever. I’m safer *with* you than *without* you,” I reasoned.

I couldn’t give in this time. I didn’t want to hurt Marcus, but I really needed to go with him and do what I could for the women who hadn’t been rescued from Gregory Becker’s human trafficking ring. Just the thought of kidnapped women being in the clutches of an evil man like the rebel leader made me nauseous. I knew what they’d suffer, and I knew that they would most likely die after they’d been used like they were an old possession rather than a human being.

“Be ready early,” he finally said irritably. “You don’t make a move without telling me you’re doing it.”

My heart clenched as I watched a pained expression cross his face. It was killing him to agree, but I was guessing he decided he would do better with me than without me. He might have contacts in that area, but it wasn’t a town he’d spent a ton of time visiting. His appearances had been quick, probably just long enough to meet with his informants in the region.

I lifted my hand and ran it over his lightly whiskered jaw. “Thank you,” I said sincerely.

His arms tightened around me. “Hell, I never really had any choice. I knew you’d move your ass like it was on fire once you heard that two women were in trouble.”

I smiled. “You’re moving pretty quickly yourself.”

He shrugged. “Your brother can’t go. He’s watching out for Ruby.”

Maybe he didn’t want to make a big deal out of his humanitarian efforts, but Marcus was the type of man who

wouldn't be able to live with the fact that he hadn't tried to help those women. "You want to help them, too," I accused gently.

"I *want* to keep your beautiful ass safe. I shouldn't have mentioned the captive women. I should have known you'd jump right into the fire to save them," he countered.

I kissed him tenderly and then pulled back to tell him, "You're a good man, Marcus."

He snorted. "Never heard *that* one before."

"You should. It's true."

"Then you're probably one of the only people who believe that. Most people think I'm an asshole, even my friends."

I laughed at his self-deprecating comment. I'd heard Jett call Marcus a jerk on more than one occasion, but I knew he'd been joking. Underneath his bluster, Marcus was an incredible man. Oh, he was cautious, a trait that probably came from the work he did for the government. But anybody who got to know him would eventually see that underneath the asshole exterior, there was a guy with a very good heart.

"You're taking me with you," I reminded him.

"Reluctantly," he answered in an unhappy tone. "And only because I think you'd get yourself into more trouble without me."

"You know I have more pull in that area," I argued.

"Maybe you do, but I'm still not happy about this entire situation. But I wasn't going to lie to you. I guess I assumed you'd be okay with letting me go alone since it isn't a place you really want to go right now."

"I *need* to go," I said. "I have to set myself free."

"And I want to lock you up," he said huskily.

"We could try out those handcuffs in advance," I suggested.

“You think I won’t?” he asked, one arrogant eyebrow raised in challenge.

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “I’m so *not* scared.”

In fact, the thought of being naked and at Marcus’s mercy was an erotic pleasure I was pretty sure I’d thoroughly enjoy.

He stood, surging to his feet and pulling me up with him. I squealed as he tossed me over his shoulder. “Marcus, let me down. I think you have a fetish about carrying me around like a caveman.”

I was laughing as he smacked me on the ass, not listening to a word I said as he made for the bedroom.

“Not a fetish,” he denied. “I’m just eager to see you in handcuffs.”

I was still smiling as he took me into the bedroom and then set me back on my feet.

“You’re impossible,” I accused, unable to stop the silly grin from remaining on my face.

“You like that about me,” he said arrogantly.

I couldn’t argue. He was right. I did, in fact, love his stubbornness when he wasn’t driving me crazy.

“I don’t love it,” I denied falsely, putting my hands on my hips as I rolled my eyes.

“Yeah, you do,” he corrected in a husky tone. “You love the way I keep trying until I get you naked, and then *insist* that you come.”

Oh, hell. I *did* love that.

“Are you going to keep talking, or are you going to show me?” My body was already on fire for him, and he hadn’t even touched me.

He went silent as he got to work on showing me just how much I loved his persistence.



Chapter 25



Marcus

“**W**hat the fuck do you mean that they aren’t here?” I exploded at Jett, who was on the other end of my cell phone conversation.

We’d only been in Turkey for a day, but it was so fucking hot that I was practically melting in my custom suit and tie.

I was standing at the side of a small street in town, and I’d stopped to call Jett while Dani was just up the road and around the corner talking to one of the locals.

“I mean we found them,” Jett answered, seemingly unaffected by my temper. “They were released with the help of a couple of doctors in the same town you’re in right now. They made it back to Europe shaken up, but they were okay.”

“And you couldn’t have found that out before I left US soil with your sister?” I complained, knowing full well it wasn’t really Jett’s fault.

“Hell, I didn’t know you’d take Dani with you.”

“Could I stop her?” I drawled.

Danica was capable of bowling people over like a hurricane.

“You probably could have, but you obviously didn’t want to,” Jett observed.

“Nobody stops Dani when she’s determined to do something,” I answered in a grim voice.

“She’s stubborn,” Jett agreed. “*You* should be able to relate to *that*.”

“She makes me crazy,” I confided. “It’s like she’s determined to get herself into bad situations.”

“She’s with you,” Jett said. “She’ll be okay. And in my sister’s defense, she doesn’t intentionally try to get in tricky situations. It happens because she cares too damn much. How is she doing mentally?”

“I think she was apprehensive when we first got here. But an hour later, she was running around, talking to the locals and the medical staff here. She seems comfortable here now.”

“You care about her,” Jett said without question.

“More than I should,” I answered reluctantly. “She’ll put me through hell.”

“She’s a handful, but I think you can deal with that because she’s also one of the kindest people I know. And I’m not just saying that because she’s my sister. Her heart is always in everything she does,” Jett threw back at me.

“I know,” I admitted. “But sometimes she takes on too many burdens that aren’t her own.”

“Dani considers anything that she can possibly resolve as her own personal battle. She’s always been that way, Marcus. There’s nothing any of us can do to change her nature, and I’m not sure I’d want to if I could.”

“I know,” I told him. “I don’t want to change her, but I fucking worry about her.”

“Break her heart and I’ll kill you,” Jett mentioned casually.

“She’s more likely to break mine,” I mumbled.

“Better yours than hers,” Jett said solemnly. “Dani has been through enough. I don’t know how you feel about her, but if it isn’t something permanent, don’t screw with her head.”

“Fuck! I *want* it to be permanent. I’m not sure that she wants something that means a commitment.” The last thing I wanted to do was scare her away by confessing that I wanted her to stay with me for the rest of our lives. Now that we’d been together, I couldn’t imagine spending my life without her. Every second I spent with her was like a gift, and I didn’t want it to end.

“If she’s with you, she wants something permanent,” Jett informed me. “She’s not the type to go into anything without wanting everything.”

“She’s had other men in her life,” I argued.

“Not very many,” Jett said. “And they were never anything serious.”

“What makes you think she wants more than a fling?” I asked curiously.

“Because she’s Dani,” he said simply. “I’ve never seen her look at any guy the way she looks at you.”

A kernel of hope started to open in my heart. “I hope you’re right,” I shot back at him. “Otherwise, I’m fucked.”

I heard Jett’s amused laugh coming from the phone. “Dude, I never thought I’d say this to you, but you’re pathetic.”

“I know,” I agreed readily. “I fucking hate it.”

“She’s worth it,” he argued.

I knew Jett was right. Dani was worth whatever insecurity and fear I had to live through to keep her. Uncomfortable discussing Dani with her brother, I finally asked, “Is everything okay there?”

“Yeah. We’re good. Ruby’s been through hell, but she’s a fighter.”

“And you’re absolutely certain that those two women are safe?” I asked, wanting to make sure before I told Dani.

“I’m positive,” Jett said emphatically. “I just talked to both of them myself. I wish I would have gotten that information before you flew all the way there.”

“It’s okay,” I told him, feeling a little guilty about the way I’d taken his head off verbally. “As you said, you had no idea they were safe a day or two ago. I’m just glad all is well. I can get your sister and get the hell out of here.”

“How safe is it there, really?” Jett asked, his voice demanding the truth.

“As safe as it can be for a town near the border, I guess,” I told him. “And not nearly as secure as I’d like it. Your sister likes to point out that anything can happen anywhere, but I sure as hell don’t like her here. I don’t know how I ever left her when I saw her in dangerous areas before.”

“Maybe you were in denial,” Jett suggested. “I think all of us were. Dani never seemed to be concerned, so all of her siblings, including me, just lived with it. We worried about her, but the longer time went by without anything happening to her, the less anxious we were for her. That was a mistake that will never happen again.”

“I fucking worried,” I admitted. “But we barely knew each other, and all we did was antagonize each other. I think that’s how I dealt with the fear that something would happen to her. If all she did was piss me off, I told myself I was happy to leave her to her own business.”

“But it wasn’t that simple?” Jett queried.

“*Nothing* with your sister is *ever* that simple,” I grumbled. “She still pisses me off.”

“But you *still* love her,” Jett stated.

More than you’ll ever fucking know! Aloud, I answered, “Yeah. Go figure that one out.”

“I think anybody you care about, and is worth fighting for, is going to irritate the hell out of you sometimes,” Jett replied

in a humorous tone.

“I think her stubbornness is one of the things I actually like about her, too, so it’s rather paradoxical. Love doesn’t make sense,” I told Jett in an annoyed voice.

Jett chuckled. “It doesn’t *have* to make sense. It wouldn’t be so amazing if it did.”

I wondered how my friend could still find being in love so attractive since he’d been dumped by an evil bitch who didn’t like the way he looked after his accident. I had to give the guy some credit. He’d eventually discovered that what he’d had with Lisette had been one-sided and conditional.

Love wasn’t completely comfortable for me. It left me way too vulnerable, and I hated that feeling. But I’d rather be exposed than let go of Danica.

“I guess,” I finally answered. “Right now I’m going to find your sister and get the hell out of here so I know she’s safe.”

“Okay. Let me know when you make it back stateside,” Jett requested.

I agreed, and then we both hung up.

I put my phone back in to my jacket pocket. After it was secure, I shrugged out of my suit coat. It was so damn hot that I was sweating bullets.

I undid my tie and pulled that off, too, shoving it into my coat pocket as well.

Although this country had some more temperate areas, this particular town wasn’t one of those places, and it was fucking July. It wasn’t like Saudi Arabia during the day, but it also lacked any buildings with air conditioning, so the heat was getting incredibly uncomfortable.

I wondered how Dani was faring with her redheaded complexion.

Determined to find her and give her the news that the two women we were searching for were actually safe, I turned and started making my way down the rough street.

We'd ventured into a part of the village that didn't have many people milling around. Her contact had been farther away from the center of town, which was one reason why I'd let her go ahead of me while I checked in with her brother. The area was fairly quiet, so I'd thought it was safe enough to let her out of my direct line of sight. But only just barely. In reality, I'd be able to see her if it wasn't for the buildings.

I was almost to the corner when the blast occurred. Later, I'd never remember seeing the young, inexperienced suicide bomber who came into town behind me.

All I'd remember was the way the bomb had exploded like everything in the area was going up in smoke.

Shattering glass.

The force of the explosion knocking me down into the dirt, my head connecting with the street.

For a few moments, I knew nothing.

After that, all I experienced was fear in the debris-filled air as I saw the shop around the corner that Dani had gone to visit, and my determination to get Dani out of the collapsing building even if I had to claw my way in.



Chapter 26



Dani

The explosion had taken me completely by surprise, so I'd never quite understood what hit me.

Stunned, I was on the dirt floor, still trying to process what had happened when my mind latched on to one thing: Marcus was outside.

Marcus. Oh, God. Was he safe?

“A bomb. It had to be a bomb,” I muttered to myself. “And it was close.”

I wasn't unfamiliar with the sound of a bomb exploding, but it had taken a minute to shake off the shock and realize exactly what had happened so close to my location. I'd never experienced the noise quite so loud or so devastating.

The entire building had come down on top of my head. I had a small space to move, but there was no way I could get myself out of the debris. Part of the ceiling was right above me, and between the rafters on the ground, I could see a ton of broken glass.

If I'm in a desperate situation like this...how is Marcus?

He'd been out in the open, exposed to the full force of the explosives.

My eyes were starting to adjust to the dim atmosphere around me, the air still loaded with small particles and smoke.

“Baris!” I tried to call out to my friend who had been across the room from me when the bomb had gone off.

He didn't answer, and I was hoping he had gotten clear of the falling building. Baris had been close to the exit, so it was entirely possible he was safe.

I kept shouting out my friend's name, but there was no response.

There were voices outside screaming, so help had arrived, but my heart was pounding as I laid my aching head down on the dirt.

"Please let Marcus be okay," I murmured in a painful whisper. "Don't let anything happen to him."

A tear trickled down my cheek, my heart desperately wanting to deny that he could be injured...or worse.

"I love him," I said aloud, hearing the words I'd been keeping inside my mind for days.

It was a relief to admit to myself exactly how I felt about Marcus. Honestly, I'd probably always just been a little bit in love with the frustrating alpha male. But it had really grown during the time we'd spent together in Florida and in Colorado. I'd gotten to know who Marcus was inside, and fallen completely, head-over-heels in love for the very first time in my life.

It felt good.

But it also hurt because I knew our relationship would be temporary.

Marcus would eventually have to go back to traveling, and I'd move on to my next story. Problem was, I hadn't wanted to miss a moment of what was in between those events, so I'd let myself experience the pleasure. I'd pay a high price for indulging, but it didn't matter.

He'd probably been the only man I could have trusted enough to sleep with after what had happened to me.

It was ironic that the very healing I'd experienced with Marcus would probably break my heart in the future.

"Just let him be okay. I'll deal with everything else when the time comes," I whispered, my throat too sore now to speak louder. The smoke and dust was getting to me.

I tormented myself about Marcus's safety, trapped until somebody came along to help me out of the toppled building. I felt so damn guilty. I'd been the one to get Marcus into this position. If he hadn't come to Florida to find me, he probably wouldn't be in this particular border town right now. If not for me, he'd be safe.

I told myself over and over that I couldn't think about the past, but I still did. If something happened to Marcus, I'd hate myself for insisting that I go with him. Even if he'd still ended up here looking for the missing women, he definitely wouldn't have been in this area. It was me who had brought him here because I had my own contacts to see.

"Please be okay. Please be okay."

I chanted the words under my breath, the small phrase becoming my mantra.

I'd come here to help save lives, and I'd quickly regained my confidence and lost my fear of this town and the surrounding area. It hadn't taken me long after I'd arrived here to get back into the swing of hunting down information. The friends I'd made in this village had greeted me warmly, all of them happy that I was doing okay.

Finally, I'd felt like I was making a recovery from my fears.

I just desperately hoped that I hadn't gotten Marcus hurt in the process.

If it wasn't for me, he most likely wouldn't have been in Turkey right now, much less a border town that evidently had just taken some kind of bomb strike.

He never would have gotten involved in Miami if I hadn't been chasing after Becker, and it would have been a much lengthier time until we'd run into each other again.

I closed my eyes, the smoke and dirty air around me starting to make them burn like crazy.

Even though I loved Marcus more than anything, I'd give everything up right now just to see him be safe.

I have to find him!

I really wanted to get the hell out of this store and go find Marcus, but if I started to move, I'd more than likely cause the roof to come down on top of me. I needed somebody to move stuff from the outside in so I had an escape route without moving some of the supports around me that were keeping me from getting crushed.

My heart started to hammer as I heard movement coming from outside the building. I could hear people working on digging me out. Although I had no patience for waiting, I had to keep myself alive so I could do everything I could to help Marcus. I had to find him, and to accomplish that, I'd have to get out of this spot alive.

“Danica!”

My heart lurched as I heard a male voice calling my name. A tone that sounded very much like Marcus.

My eyes popped open, and I could see someone progressively making their way to my location, the masculine figure tossing large pieces of debris aside much faster than he ought to be able to move.

“Marcus!” I shrieked.

“Dani?” he called, his voice hoarse and stressed out.

“I'm here. Be careful. The roof is going to collapse. There isn't much holding it above the ground.”

I could see him now, and I watched as he pushed away the loose wood, being careful that he didn't yank out a necessary piece.

"Are you okay?" he hollered.

"Yes. I just need an opening to get out. If I move some of these pieces near me to get out of here, I'm afraid the roof will go."

"Don't fucking move," Marcus demanded. "I'll clear a path from here."

"Are you okay?" I asked anxiously.

"Hell, no, I'm *not* okay. I'm goddamn terrified that you're going to get crushed."

It was a typical *Marcus* kind of reply, but so incredibly sweet that it made my tears flow steadily. "I meant are you *physically* all right? Were you hurt in the explosion?"

"I'll live," he said in a voice loud enough to travel.

To me, that meant that he was injured, but didn't want to admit it.

I finally saw his face as he crouched at the end of an opening he'd cleared with his bare hands.

"Marcus, you are hurt," I cried out, anxious because I could see the blood on his face.

"I'm fine," he said sharply. "Right now all I want is to get you out of here. Can you give me your hands without upsetting anything? I'll pull you out through the area I just cleared."

He was downplaying his injuries, but I wasn't going to get any answers until I got away from the building.

"Yes. I can move them." I lifted my arms carefully, stretching out so I could clasp his hands.

“Are you hurt? I don’t want to make anything worse,” he questioned hesitantly.

“No,” I replied. “I was confused for a few minutes, but I’m not hurt.”

He reached into my space, grasping my hands and then pulled me out, slow and steady. I carefully tried to keep myself positioned away from the beams that I was fairly certain was keeping the roof from hitting the ground.

In just a few moments, I was out, away from the building, and being held tightly in Marcus’s arms.

We clung to each other, and I never wanted to let him go. In the moments I’d questioned whether or not he was still alive, I’d nearly died myself.

“Baris?” I asked anxiously about my friend as I hugged Marcus just as firmly as he was holding me.

“He’s okay,” Marcus answered. “Just a few minor injuries. He’s being treated at the clinic.”

I pulled back so I could look at him.

I reached up to touch the gash on his head. I couldn’t help but notice his hands were also bleeding from digging through the wood and glass to get me out of my prison barehanded. “You’re hurt, Marcus. You need to get to the medical clinic.”

The wound on his head was open and blood was still flowing from his injury. The shirt that had been white this morning was now covered in his blood. No doubt the head wound had just kept on bleeding as he’d pulled me out of the wreckage of the store.

“I’m good,” he said in a tone heavy with emotion. “I just want to get you the hell out of here.”

“I’m okay,” I argued.

“I’m not,” he confessed. “I don’t ever want to live through another incident of not knowing whether you’re dead or alive,

Danica. I can't."

"I was scared, too," I said in a tremulous voice as I put my arms around him again and hugged him to me. "I knew you were outside. I didn't know where you were when the bomb exploded."

"I was worrying about you. It seems I'm rather good at doing that now," he answered, his torn-up hands stroking over my hair in a comforting motion.

"We're safe," I said tearfully, the enormity of what had just happened starting to sink in.

"Let's go home," he suggested, but he didn't move.

"We have to find those women—"

"They're safe," Marcus told me. "Somebody helped them get home. Jett confirmed it."

Oh, God. The irony didn't escape me that we were in Turkey looking for the two women, and they were home safe. We'd nearly gotten ourselves killed for two females who hadn't needed our help.

Even though it hurt to separate myself from Marcus, I pulled back so we could leave. "You need to have your injuries checked before we go," I insisted, concerned about the size of the laceration on his head.

"I'll have them checked when we get home," he said stubbornly.

"Now," I demanded.

I expected a smart-ass answer, and I was actually concerned when I didn't get it. I looked at Marcus anxiously, noting that he was pale, and he was holding his hand to his head.

"I'll be..." His voice trailed off as he sat down on a nearby crate that hadn't been blown away.

I squatted beside him. “Marcus, talk to me,” I said in a panic.

He never said another word.

He lost consciousness as I struggled to hold him up, screaming for somebody—anybody—to help me.



Chapter 27



Dani

Two days later, we were finally on board Marcus's jet, headed for home.

He'd scared the hell out of me, and I'd never let him forget it. After he'd been treated as much as he could be at the medical clinic, he'd been transported to the capital city for further testing. He'd stayed a few days there for observation after the tests had come out negative for fractures. Marcus had one hell of a concussion, but he was recovering.

Luckily, the suicide bomber had been inexperienced. Just a girl, really, somewhere around the age of eighteen. Alone, she'd wandered into the wrong part of the town, and there had been plenty of damage, but no fatalities except for the rebel bomber.

I mourned the life of somebody that young, and I'd felt a profound sadness that she'd been so full of violence.

"Hey, are you okay?" Marcus asked from his supine position on the bed. We'd lifted off and then I'd insisted on bringing him back to rest.

I was sitting cross-legged next to him, lost in my thoughts as I looked at the bandage on his forehead. I'd lost count of the number of sutures it had taken to close his laceration, but it was healing well. "Just tired, I guess," I answered as I smiled down at him.

"You *are* in a bed now," he reminded me.

I rubbed a hand over my eyes. “I know. But I’ve had a hard time sleeping.”

“Worried about me?” he asked curiously.

I gave him an exasperated look. “Yes, I was worried.”

“I have a pretty hard head,” he said in an amused tone, his hand stroking over my back with a soothing touch.

His palms and fingers were already healing. Luckily, the damage to his hands had been superficial.

I snorted. “For once, I’m *glad* you’re hard-headed.”

I maneuvered my body down so I could lie next to him on my side, my head propped up on my hand.

“I’m doing all right. So why the pensive look on your face?” he asked in a tender voice.

Gently, I reached up to stroke the hair from his forehead. “I just keep thinking how things could have worked out. If you’d been closer, it could have been really bad.”

“Don’t, Dani,” he said sternly. “Don’t drive yourself crazy with how ugly it could have been. I tortured myself with the same thoughts for the first day after it happened. Then I realized how damn lucky we are. I’m focusing on the fact that we’re both still here, and relatively unscathed.”

Marcus could make light of his injuries, but I couldn’t. Otherwise, he was right. I really needed to be glad we were both still alive. He would heal, and be back to normal in a week or so. Except for maybe a small scar, he wouldn’t have any lasting effects from the explosion.

“I know you’re right, but I was really scared,” I confided.

Marcus wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me against his body. I relaxed, letting my head drop onto his chest.

“You asked me once what I was afraid of,” Marcus said thoughtfully.

“I remember,” I muttered.

“What happened is exactly what I’m fucking terrified about,” he said in a graveled voice. “I’m scared as hell that something will happen to you. You don’t exactly live a noneventful life, and that worries me. I don’t get uptight about very many things, but losing you or seeing you hurt again is my greatest fear. I can’t see you brutalized and broken again, Dani. It almost killed me after we pulled you out of that rebel camp.”

My eyes teared up, and no matter how hard I tried to blink them back, they still fell. “But I survived, Marcus. Maybe I’ll never be quite the same as I was before it happened, but I realized even before the bombing that going back had somehow set me free.”

He was silent for a moment before he asked, “Do you mean that?”

“Yes. I’m not saying that I don’t need to keep meeting with my counselor, but I think everything fell into place, all I need to do now is sort it all out. I’m not anxious anymore. I doubt I’ll ever be as fearless as I used to be. But some of that lack of fear was based on the fact that I’d never really understood how quickly life could end. I’d never really experienced intense pain or fear. After I did, I was warier.”

“I never want to see you afraid, in pain, or anxious,” he grumbled.

“I don’t welcome it, either,” I admitted. “But I have to admit that no matter how much I’d like to go back and be the same person I was before the kidnapping, I can’t. I have to be okay with who I am now.”

“Are you?”

“Yeah. I think I am,” I mused.

“Did going back make you want to get your old life back?” he asked hesitantly.

I sighed. “No. I can never go back. I have to move forward. I’d like to stay a freelance investigative reporter wherever there are stories to be told. But I’m not sad I gave up my beat anymore. I’ve discovered that I don’t always have to be in every hot spot in the world. I can find my stories that need to be told in all parts of the world.”

“Thank fuck,” Marcus cursed. “I want you to be with me.”

I tried to ignore the way my heart was galloping inside my chest. I loved Marcus with every fiber of my being, but I wasn’t going to get my hopes up that our time wasn’t going to be limited. “You’ll go back to traveling eventually,” I said lightly, trying to pretend that separating wouldn’t tear my heart out.

“Not as much,” he informed me. “It seems my executives are doing my job quite well overseas, and if the government doesn’t have a problem with me training somebody to do some of my intel work, I think I have the perfect man to take over.”

“You’re going to stop being James Bond?” I asked incredulously.

“I’m *not* playing James Bond, and yes, I don’t think I’d mind turning some of that over to somebody younger. I’m tired of not eating chocolate,” he teased. “It’s not that I won’t travel, and I’ll still meet up with some of my contacts for intel, but I’m about ready to spend more time with my family and at my home in Rocky Springs. I regret that I’ve missed so much because I’m constantly away.”

I understood how alone a person could feel when they were traveling all the time. I’d felt separated from my siblings for a long time, and I missed them. “I missed my family, too,” I confessed. “I think I just kept myself too busy to notice.”

“You never commented on what I said,” he reminded me.

“What?”

“I want you to be with me, Dani. I want you to stay with me. Will you?” His voice was hopeful.

“I don’t know if I can,” I replied honestly, tears still pouring from my eyes and landing on the bare skin of his chest.

“Why?” he grunted.

I was quiet, afraid to tell him about everything I was thinking. I didn’t want him to feel pressured for more, but I had to be true to myself. “I love you, Marcus.”

He rolled onto his side and propped his head up, forcing me to do the same, so we were facing each other. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. I love you so much it hurts. I’m not sure I can be in a relationship with you and not want more than just sex.”

“You and I have *never* been all about sex,” he protested. “Jesus, Dani! Can’t you feel it? I think I’ve known that we were more than just sexually attracted for a long time, but I didn’t want to acknowledge it. Yeah. Okay. My primary instinct was to fuck you, and that’s never gone away. But I think we both know this has never completely been about sex.”

“I didn’t think so, but I wasn’t sure what you wanted. I didn’t know if you wanted love, but I can’t *not* say it anymore.”

“I fucking want it all,” he said in a warning voice. “I want everything you’re willing to give, and then I’ll want more after that.”

“You want something that involves a commitment?”

“Oh, hell, yeah. I want you and I to be as committed as two people can get,” he answered in a husky voice. “I want to hammer out some kind of compromise so we can travel together, and be home at the same damn time. I want you to

marry me, and wear my ring on your finger so every bastard out there knows that you're mine."

"You want me to marry you?" I asked apprehensively.

Marcus Colter wasn't a marrying type of guy...or I'd never seen him as one until now.

"I can't believe you would ever doubt that I wanted us to be together. I love you, too, Danica. Say you'll marry me so I don't have to have a heart attack over whether or not you're going to agree."

My eyes met his in a clash of intensity that was flowing between the two of us.

Maybe I'd always had doubts about where we could go as a couple, but now that I knew he loved me, too, I felt like I could fly. "Yes," I answered simply.

"Yes, you will?" Marcus probed. "Will you marry me? I don't have a ring yet, but—"

I put a gentle hand in his hair and cut off his words as I leaned forward to kiss him. I didn't give a damn about a ring, or the formalities. All I needed to know was that he loved me.

Everything else was nothing more than inconsequential details.

He wrapped an arm around my waist and then pushed me onto my back, his mouth demanding as he took control of the embrace.

It was the sweetest, hottest kiss I'd ever experienced.

He lingered, nipping at my bottom lip, and then soothing it with his tongue.

The kiss wasn't carnal, and I wasn't about to let it get out of control. It wasn't going anywhere. Marcus was fresh out of the hospital. The last thing he needed right now was bedroom Olympics.

But we could savor the moment, and all of the emotions that went along with deciding that we loved each other so much that we wanted to spend the rest of our lives together.

When he finally lifted his head, I looked into his eyes and simply said, “Yes. I’ll marry you. I’ll stay with you. I’ll continue to let you steal my chocolate for as long as we both shall live,” I joked. “Now you need to get some rest.”

“I’d rather get you naked,” he answered.

“No sex. We both just admitted this isn’t all about sex. And you just got out of the hospital. No strenuous activities for you.”

His expression was disappointed. “I know it’s not *all* sexual, but that doesn’t mean I still don’t desperately want you naked.”

I wanted him, too, but I was content to wait. “Your health is my biggest priority.”

“Mine, too,” he said in a grim voice. “My balls are blue right now.”

I laughed out loud. I couldn’t believe he actually wanted to have sex when he was still recovering from his injuries. “Go to sleep,” I insisted, pushing him onto his back. “The last thing you need to think about right now is getting laid.”

“It’s the first thing I’m thinking about,” he answered glumly.

“You can go a few days without,” I told him as I settled beside him and put my head on his chest.

“Yeah, I can,” he admitted. “Hell, I used to go without for months, or even a year. But since the first time I touched you in Florida, I can’t fucking think about anything else.”

I smiled against the smooth skin of his chest. Honestly, I pretty much felt the same way, but I wasn’t going to admit it right now. “I love you, Marcus,” I murmured instead.

“Christ! I love you, too, baby,” he said in a husky voice as he wrapped his arms tightly around me. “You can check one more thing off your bucket list because you’re never going to find a guy who loves you as much as I do.”

I sighed, happy as I heard Marcus’s breathing even out, a definite sign that he was exhausted and needed to rest.

He wants to spend the rest of our lives together. He wants to marry me.

I decided it was finally time for me to close the window of my past and throw open the door to my future with Marcus.

A tear trickled down my cheek, but it wasn’t from sadness or fear. It was created from the intense joy that was in my heart, and the knowledge that Marcus loved me as much as I loved him.

All of the pain I’d gone through was over, and I was finally ready to move on.

Knowing that I was sprinting forward with a man I loved more than life itself made my new mindset that much sweeter than it ever had been before.

He was the important piece of the puzzle of my life that had always been missing, even though I’d never known it until he had been fit snugly into that empty space.

I fell into an exhausted sleep, held safely in his arms, knowing that no matter how irritated I made him, and vice versa, there would *always* be love.



Chapter 28



Dani

“I love how close all of your family is with each other,” I told Marcus a few days later as we drove home from dinner at his mother’s house in Rocky Springs.

It was a beautifully clear summer’s evening. Because we were riding in one of Marcus’s many sports cars, I could see the stars. The convertible gave me a perfect view of the Colorado sky.

I relished the feel of being in the open air. My hair would probably end up looking like a bird’s nest, but to feel this way, so free and buoyant, it was completely worth it.

“Your family is close,” he replied.

I shrugged. “When we’re all able to get together. I think so much fell apart when my parents died so suddenly. We all sort of went our own way to deal with our grief. Your mom seems to hold everything together in your family.”

“I agree,” he answered. “She’s been the glue that’s fused our family together since my father died. But traveling the world doesn’t help. We both have some time to try to make up with our families.”

Marcus and I had talked a lot about what we wanted to do in the future.

I would see a lot more of Harper since we were in the same town, and my sister and I had vowed to try to get together more with our brothers. Harper would still be traveling with

her senator husband, Blake, back and forth to Washington, DC, and I wanted to travel with Marcus internationally so I could find my own stories to write. But Harper and I would both be home and in one place a lot more often, so we were determined to force ourselves into our brothers' lives if necessary.

I loved every one of my siblings. None of us had ever wanted to grow apart.

It had just...happened.

Marcus reached out for my hand, and I entwined my fingers with his as I finally promised, "We'll make time in the future."

I already adored Tate, and his wife, Lara. Zane and his wife, Ellie, were both extremely kind. I'd met Gabe and Chloe for the first time earlier in the evening. And of course, Harper and Blake had been at the family supper, too.

Honestly, I already knew that I was going to come to love Marcus's family as much as he did. The Colter women were already trying to pull me into their circle by planning various activities together. It was going to be nice to have family again, but having Marcus's family wouldn't lessen my efforts with Harper to pull my brothers Jett, Carter, and Mason back into the fold.

I smiled as we pulled into Marcus's driveway and he took the small paved road that drove around the massive house and to the back where he had a ten-car garage where he stored his *summer* cars. There was a three-car garage attached to the house where he kept his luxury vehicles that were appropriate for all-weather driving.

As serious and sensible as Marcus was, I was delighted to see that he was still a boy who loved his toys. All ten spaces were full of luxury or classic sports cars. It seemed to be Marcus's one big indulgence, and I wasn't about to complain.

He could afford them, and I got the benefit of riding in the powerhouse vehicles.

Eventually, I'd finagle him into letting me drive all of them. A girl loved her toys, too.

After he closed up the garage, he took my hand and we walked to the house together. "It seems strange to actually have a permanent home," I said in a thoughtful voice.

I'd spent years running all over the planet, but I'd never invested in a home. Yeah, Harper and I had purchased the condo in Miami together, but that was more of an investment than a home.

"If you don't like this one, we can buy a different house," he suggested.

Oh, hell no. "You had this home built custom," I scolded. "And I love it."

Marcus's house was enormous, but it was a reflection of him, and I couldn't have planned out a better home for us.

He let me into the house and disabled the alarm before he turned back to me. "I don't want this to be all about me, Dani. Hell, I don't even know if you want to live in Rocky Springs. I can live anywhere, but I can't live without you."

I threw myself into his arms, my heart so light it nearly floated out of my chest. "It's *not* all about you. I don't have a home, Marcus. I never bothered because I was too busy trying to chase stories. But this is where we both grew up, and my sister is here. It's perfect."

His arms tightened around my waist. "I just want you to be happy," he grumbled.

I pulled back so I could look up at his face. "Tell me you love me," I requested.

His beautiful silver eyes were flashing fire as he said obligingly, "I love you."

I ran a hand along the dark stubble on his jaw. “That’s all I need to be ecstatically happy.”

He nodded and shot me a wicked grin that immediately had heat pooling between my thighs.

When Marcus smiled, my world turned upside down.

He clasped my hand and pulled me toward the kitchen. “I’m glad you feel that way, love, because there’s more.”

Bemused, I followed his lead. I wasn’t sure how much more *happiness* I could handle.

I stopped abruptly as we entered the kitchen. “What in the world...”

The kitchen table was full of items, but the first thing that caught my attention was two heart-shaped balloons attached to the most beautiful bouquet of red roses I’d ever seen.

One balloon said “Marry.”

The second said “Me.”

I covered my mouth, my emotions close to the surface. “I already said *yes*,” I reminded him in a tearful tone. “How did you do this?”

“I do have assistants,” he said. “You just haven’t met them yet. I had to enlist some help to get this stuff here while we were gone.”

I gently ran a finger over the roses, and then noticed that nearly the entire table was filled with chocolate.

“You have good taste,” I said in an amused voice. I recognized most of the names on the boxes and wrappings. Everything on the table was the best of the best in chocolate, and pricey as hell. He’d gotten everything from master chocolatiers from Switzerland to France, and one from the East Coast of the US.

More often than not, I’d settled for a candy bar from a convenience store. I wasn’t that picky about how I got my

chocolate. But I wasn't averse to trying some of the items Marcus had gotten. In fact, I was downright eager to tear into the collection.

He stepped up to the table and drew a bottle of fine champagne from its icy confinement, and then uncorked it and poured it into a beautiful pair of crystal flutes.

I accepted the one he handed me, my heart racing at the thought of how much trouble Marcus had gone to just to please me. "Thank you," I said in a tremulous voice.

"It's no more than you deserve," Marcus told me as he took a sip of his champagne. "I never should have proposed in the bedroom of my damn jet. You deserve so much more than that. You're my heart, Danica."

I opened my mouth to answer him, to tell him that he was my everything, but I closed it again as I heard a high-pitched bark.

"One more thing..." His voice trailed off as he walked across the large kitchen and bent over to fumble with what looked like a crate of some kind.

I was flummoxed as a bundle of fur exploded from its confinement and hurdled straight toward me. "Oh, my God," I squealed, putting my wine glass on the table so I could catch the small canine body. "Who is this?"

"You did say you always wanted a dog. Technically, this is a puppy, but he will eventually be full-sized," he informed me.

I cuddled the squirming, excited puppy as I asked, "So it's a boy? Is he mine?"

Marcus nodded. "Yours," he confirmed.

I beamed up at him. "I'll share him with you. He looks like a German Shepherd. Does he have a name?"

"Not yet. But he will when you give him one. And he is a German Shepherd. Tate has a male, and he wanted to breed

Shep with a female before he got him fixed. This puppy is one of Shep's offspring.”

“He's gorgeous,” I said emphatically, laughing as the pup left my lap and started bouncing around the room and then ran back to me.

I stared at his collar for a moment before I reached out and tried to grab the shiny object attached to the blue collar.

It took me a moment to understand what I was holding.

“Is this mine, too?”

Marcus moved forward and offered his hand. I took it, allowing him to pull me to my feet. “If you're still willing to accept it and everything that comes along with being married to a guy like me, it's yours.”

I fingered the beautiful ring I'd snagged from the puppy's collar, my eyes filled with happy tears. I got entirely choked up as Marcus took the ring, reached for my hand, and slid the incredible diamond on my finger as he added, “If you don't want it, you're too late. You're mine now.”

“I want it,” I shrieked as he twirled me in the air.

“I'm sorry that I wasn't ready when I proposed,” he said huskily. “But you can cross another item off your bucket list. You got a proposal, even if it wasn't all that slick.”

He'd just put an absolutely amazing ring on my finger, and he was apologizing? “It doesn't matter.”

“It matters,” he argued. “I don't want you to ever regret that you married a guy who isn't very romantic.”

Maybe Marcus wasn't hearts and flowers every day, but I'd never doubt how much he loved me. This huge display just to propose to a woman who had already said *yes* was a perfect example of why I'd never think he wasn't romantic. “I'd never regret you,” I said fiercely. “Never.”

His mouth came down on mine so quickly that he took my breath away. I moaned against his lips, my body needy as I opened to him willingly, letting him plunder my mouth.

I was on fire, and I wasn't sure anything could ever extinguish the blaze.

My arms tightened around his neck, I pressed against him, feeling his enlarged cock through the denim of his jeans.

I hadn't crumbled under his other assaults to my senses, willing to wait until he was completely recovered. They'd taken his sutures out earlier today, and I'd had a feeling that I wasn't going to be able to resist our mutual hunger for each other much longer.

"Marcus," I gasped as he lifted his head.

"I know, baby. Hold on," he crooned as he lifted the cotton skirt of my casual sundress, and then stroked his fingers over my saturated panties.

My head fell back as the heat of his touch consumed me. "Yes. Now. Please."

I couldn't wait for him to fuck me after days of self-deprivation. I wanted him inside me, his hips thrusting over and over until we were both spent.

He crunched up the panties in his hand, and then tugged hard. "No more waiting," he said, demanding.

"No more waiting," I repeated as I felt the small piece of torn, silken material slip down my legs and to the floor.

My core clenched ferociously as Marcus stroked through my folds and his fingers entered my wet heat.

I moaned again as he teased my clit, ready to plead for mercy.

His hands finally grasped my ass, and he carried me over to the table and set my butt down on the edge. He cleared space

with a wide sweep of his muscular arm, and I never mourned the expensive chocolate that hit the floor.

I craved Marcus so much more than I longed for any kind of chocolate.

I propped myself up on my arms and watched as he furiously freed his cock from his jeans.

“Can’t. Wait,” he growled. “Put your legs around me.”

“Don’t wait,” I pleaded as I obeyed his command. “Now.”

I inhaled sharply as he pulled my body forward and buried himself inside me in one powerful thrust.

“Yes. Just like that. No holding back,” I panted.

“I couldn’t if I wanted to,” he answered in a low, carnal tone.

It was hard and fast. Beautiful and frenzied. Marcus pummeled into me with a desperation that I returned.

“More,” I cried.

He gave me more, and then he did it again.

Keeping up his punishing pace, my body started to tremble as Marcus pounded into me with no mercy. All I could do was ride the wave of desire that had flooded me, and then took over my body until all I could think of was the man that seemed eager to drive me completely insane.

He tightened his hold on the cheeks of my ass, holding me in place while he kept stroking into me over and over.

“I need to come, Marcus,” I whimpered.

“Then come for me,” he replied in a raw, feral tone. He took a hand from my ass, and then found the spot I needed him to touch with his fingers.

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” I let go and let the force of my orgasm take control. I rode the climax to a crescendo, my body

writhing under his ministrations. My core started to spasm. The muscles in my sheath were trying to milk him dry.

“Marcus. I love you so much,” I screamed, my whole being trembling under the force of my powerful release.

“I love you,” he returned in a groan of pure relief, surging a few more times as he emptied himself inside me.

I sat up, threw my arms around his neck, and kissed him.

It was a long, leisurely embrace. I speared one hand through the hair at the back of his head, sighing into his mouth as he held me tightly. “Marcus,” I said in a whisper as I pulled my head back.

We clung to each other. I wasn't sure how long we stayed in that position, but it took the puppy's annoyed bark to snap us out of our own little world, both of us laughing as we finally pulled our satiated bodies apart.

I picked up my destroyed undies and tossed them into the garbage can without a single ounce of remorse.

I was rich. Marcus was rich. I could buy new panties. But nothing could ever replace what had just happened between us.

Money could never buy this kind of happiness.

I smiled as I watched Marcus give our new puppy the affection it wanted.

If I had the man I loved, I could easily learn to just buy my underwear in mass quantities in the future.



Epilogue



Marcus

Several months later...

“Harper is pregnant,” Blake announced without warning in a terrified voice.

My twin and I were hitting a few stores in Rocky Springs before we met up with Harper and Dani for lunch.

Strangely enough, we were at a specialty candy shop, and we were both looking.

I wasn't really surprised that Blake's wife was pregnant since I was pretty sure he practiced at getting her pregnant a lot. He adored his wife, and I knew Blake wanted kids, so I asked, “And this isn't a good thing?”

He picked up a box of chocolates and then put them down again as he replied, “It wasn't supposed to happen. She can't have children, but I knew that when I married her.”

“Then how did she get pregnant?”

I was assuming he'd done it in the normal way, but I didn't want to go there with my brother.

“It just happened. I guess it was possible, but highly unlikely. We've talked about adopting. We didn't expect this to happen.”

“Congratulations,” I said as I clapped him on the back. “But you don't seem happy.”

“I’m fucking terrified,” Blake confessed. “Everything is normal so far, but anything could happen. She lost a baby after we separated over ten years ago. *My* child. *Our* child.”

I knew women gave birth every day, but the whole situation seemed a little frightening to me, too. Hell, I didn’t know how I’d be feeling if Dani was pregnant. Someday, I’d probably find out, but I was glad right now that I wasn’t in Blake’s shoes.

“I’m sorry,” I told my twin in a hoarse voice.

I was sad that I’d lost a niece or nephew, and that Blake had lost a child.

“Thanks,” he said, his attention drawn away by an oversized candy bar. “I know it’s a good thing, but I’m afraid something might happen again.”

That sounded like a legitimate concern. “Is the pregnancy high-risk?”

“Not really,” he told me. “Everything is going well. I don’t want to tell Harper that I’m a wreck. We promised we’d focus on the positive, and she needs that right now.”

Blake and I had gotten closer over the last few months, so it wasn’t unusual for me to answer, “Then focus on the fact that you’re going to have a baby, and try to forget about something you can’t control.”

Easy for me to say, but I understood what loving someone as much as Blake and I loved our wives could do to a guy. Knowing his wife was pregnant and that she’d previously lost a child was probably eating Blake up inside.

“I’m happy,” Blake said in a decidedly *unhappy* voice. “I just wish the pregnancy part was over.”

I picked up a box of Dani’s favorite candy and held onto it while I followed my brother around the store. “Are you going to buy something?”

Blake startled like I'd just woke him up. "Yeah," he said absently as he picked out a couple of different boxes and we moved toward the register to pay.

"How long until it's over?" I asked curiously as I paid for my purchase.

"Six months, twenty days, and about twelve hours until her due date," Blake said, stepping up to pay for his candy.

Poor bastard. He'll crack. He'll never make it that long.

We wandered toward the café next door after we were finished, neither one of us in a hurry since we were running ahead of schedule.

I didn't have words to make Blake feel better. I knew from experience that his anxiety wasn't going to pass until Harper delivered a healthy baby. "It will be okay," I finally said in a tone that I hoped was some kind of a voice of reason. "If it's not high-risk, the chances are excellent that she'll get through it just fine."

"I know. But I'll be worried until she's delivered," Blake said as he looked at his watch. "What do you think our women are doing?" he questioned.

"Probably in the children's store," I guessed.

Blake suddenly grinned. "Highly likely," he agreed. "Harper is buying things for the baby already."

For a moment, I saw Blake's apprehension dissolve as he became focused on the pleasant parts of having a child.

He looked...happy.

Maybe I hadn't understood his desire to marry before, but now that Dani was my wife, I was living in the same kind of "happiness bubble" as my other brothers and Chloe.

Not that everything was perfect between Dani and I. Putting two hard-headed individuals together for a lifetime meant there were going to be some disagreements, but I'd

decided a long time ago that I'd rather fight with her than screw any other female.

Besides, there was always the makeup sex. Now *that* was worth the occasional fight.

Honestly, I knew I was an asshole, and she was still my angel—even when we disagreed. Just the fact that she'd been willing to take my ass on for the rest of her life had been a goddamn miracle.

I'd married her soon after I'd gotten a ring on her finger. Having a family as big as mine all in the same area had helped us say our vows within a few weeks, my mother and the rest of the family doing their share to help Dani and I pull off a nice wedding in record time.

Blake and I were nearly to the restaurant when we were greeted by the sight of our wives coming down the sidewalk toward us.

I watched Dani laugh at something Harper had said, her face lit up by the happiness she'd found here with our families. She was extremely tight with her sister, and had become close to all of the Colter women.

I got together with my brothers on a regular basis. Blake and I were more like twins again, and we'd probably always have that certain affinity with each other now that we were together more often. He traveled back and forth to Washington, DC for his Senate duties, but we saw each other often enough.

"She's so fucking beautiful," I muttered as I watched her and Harper get closer.

"They *both* are," Blake corrected.

Dani was still in counseling, but I knew she was getting more confident and sassy every single day. Not that she hadn't *always* been audacious, but little by little, I saw less and less of the haunted look she'd once had in her eyes.

She was still writing, and she'd even done some special interest pieces in the local newspaper. If something could be argued, my wife would do it with gusto, whether it was a regional issue or relevant to the entire world. Regardless of where she was publishing one of her articles, she put her whole damn heart into every single issue she wrote about.

Dani finally looked up, and our eyes were immediately drawn to each other. Hell, I swore that I had a homing beacon that would always lead me directly to her.

My heart started to accelerate as she smiled at me, beaming with a beautiful bright light that I always associated with her jubilant grin.

Jesus Christ! How did I get lucky enough to get a woman who loves me as much as I love her?

She increased her stride, and I caught her as she careened into my chest. My arms wrapped around her tightly, and of course, my dick responded accordingly. There was no way I could smell her sweet scent without my cock going into the *completely ready* mode.

"I love you," Dani said in a breathless voice as she pulled back and gave me a short, affectionate kiss.

"I love you, too," I answered in a husky voice. I doubted there would ever be a time when I could hear those three little words from her without feeling like I had a ten-pound lump in my throat.

"Harper is going to have a baby," she announced happily. "I'm so excited. We're going to have a niece or nephew."

I shot a grin at Blake and Harper, who had just finished their own intimate greeting. "I heard. Congratulations, Harper."

Harper smiled at me. "Thanks. Now if I could just keep Blake from worrying."

"It will never happen," I told my sister-in-law bluntly.

“Nothing wrong with wishful thinking,” Harper replied, placing a kiss on her husband’s cheek. “Dani is going to throw me a baby shower.”

“Why?” Blake asked, sounding genuinely confused. “I thought those were held just for gifts. We’re rich. You can buy whatever you want.”

I shook my head. Obviously my twin hadn’t quite figured out women yet. “There is usually junk food and cake,” I explained. “And it’s the perfect opportunity for women to get together and complain about us.”

Dani gave me a playful shove. “That’s not the *only* reason. Being pregnant is a big deal, and it’s a celebration.”

Really, for Harper, the pregnancy *was* a miracle, and she had more to celebrate than many other women. I’d been teasing my brother and Dani, but I was really delighted for my brother and Harper.

“Then we’ll make it a real party,” I agreed happily. “Chocolate cake?”

“Of course,” both Dani and Harper answered at the same time.

I grinned at my wife and handed over the bag of chocolate. “Maybe this will tide you over until we can order the cake.”

She snatched the bag and held it to her chest. “Oh, God, Marcus, this is one of the reasons I love you so much,” Dani exclaimed.

I put my arm around her waist, following behind my brother and Harper as we all made our way to the café.

“You love me because I bought you chocolate?” I asked jokingly.

“No. I love you because even when we aren’t together, you’re thinking of me. It’s the little things you do that make me love you so much.”

“But buying your wife a box of sweets while you’re already in the store isn’t very romantic,” I drawled.

“I don’t agree,” she answered fiercely. “It’s *very* romantic.”

“If you say so,” I replied skeptically.

She opened the bag and squealed happily. “Okay. This chocolatier is fantastic,” she said enthusiastically. “This is amazing melted and warm. I love putting it on ice cream, but I have a better plan for it tonight.”

I let out a startled cough. “And what would your plan be?”

“I’ll surprise you.”

I already had visions of us naked and Dani licking chocolate off one particular part of my body that already adored her. “I can’t wait. Are you *really* hungry?”

“I’m starving,” she answered cheerfully.

I’m fucked!

“But I can eat fast,” she added teasingly.

“Take your time.” I didn’t want her to have to choke her food down just because she had a horny husband.

“I’ll make sure it’s worth waiting for,” she answered in a seductive tone that always made me crazy.

I knew she’d make it worth crawling through hell for, which made it that much more difficult to delay the gratification.

We stopped our banter as we arrived at the café behind my brother and Harper.

Dani did indeed eat fast, but so did Harper and Blake, which made me wonder if they had a similar arrangement to mine and Dani’s.

I inhaled my own food so fast that I hardly tasted it. Hell, what guy *wouldn’t* when he knew that he was going to spend his evening in a state of unimaginable pleasure?

At the end of the meal, I pulled Dani out of our booth, dumping the check on my brother as we made our escape, citing a previous engagement.

“With who?” Blake asked skeptically.

“None of your business,” I grumbled.

Blake snorted, but he picked up the tab so Dani and I could escape.

Someday, I’d pay him back by picking up lunches or dinners together, but my mind was set on one person only right at that moment.

When we were finally in my vehicle and driving away from Main Street, I heard Dani sigh as she said, “Take me home, Marcus.”

Hell, I couldn’t drive fast enough. Her words made me feel like I’d been sucker-punched in the gut.

My house had actually become *home* to both of us, a mixture of old and new, hers and mine, and a place where I wanted to be all the time just because Dani was there with me.

I thought about my brothers and my sister, Chloe, each one of us finding love—one right after the other. Since I was the oldest, it really should have been *me* to settle down first. But I wasn’t complaining. It had taken a special woman to put up with my ornery ass, and Danica had been well worth the wait!

~The End~

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Xxx Jan

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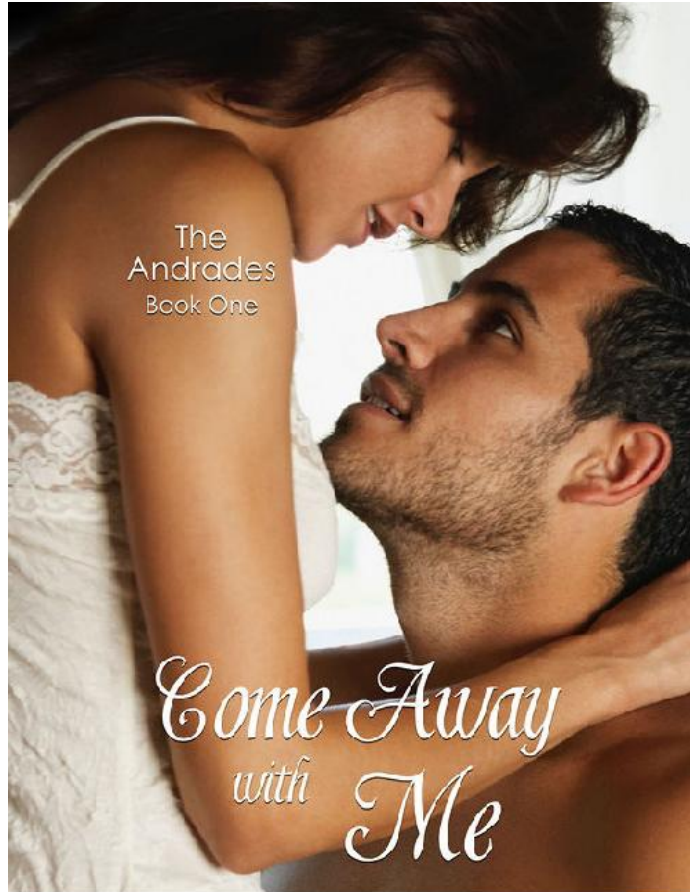
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The
Andrades
Book One

*Come Away
with Me*

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New York Times Bestselling Author

Come Away With Me

The Andrades

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Dedication

I am so grateful to everyone who was part of the process of creating *Come Away with Me*. Thank you to:

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Thank you to my husband, Tony, who listens to the story so many times he dreams about the characters.

To my niece, Danielle Stewart, for joining me in self-publishing and brainstorming with me along the way. *Always better together.*

A Note to My Readers

The Andrade family has had a special place in my heart since they first appeared in *For Love or Legacy*. I'm the youngest of eleven children. Although we didn't have money, I based the Andrades on what it was like for me to grow up with so many relatives.

My parents are no longer with us, but they were happily married for almost sixty years. My mother was the storyteller in our family. She was notoriously funny. My father was much more reserved, but he loved her sense of humor. Even when they were in their eighties, if my mother told a joke, my father would look on with a smile.

Our dining room table was a long L-shaped counter that was actually purchased from a local diner that had gone out of business. With so many children, one would think that my parents wouldn't allow us to bring friends home with us for meals, but they believed the exact opposite—friends were family to us. I often had meals with twenty or more people. For those who have read the Legacy Collection, that's where I got my philosophy that love is a fountain—where there is always enough for those who have stayed and those who return to it.

My parents taught me that family and friends are what matters the most, children should always be valued, and forgiveness is the greatest kindness you can give one another. I miss them every day, but I like to think that they live on through how I am raising my own children.

No family is perfect.

Gio, Nick, Luke and Max are on a difficult journey that will test what they think they know about loyalty and love. I hope you enjoy this series. I've fallen in love with these lost Andrades and the story of how they find their way back to their family.

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Chapter One

If you want a dose of reality, come home a day early.

Gio Andrade walked through his secretary's empty office and into his, shaking his head with disgust as he went. He double-checked the time on his watch. Barely seven o'clock. She should still be here. Someone should be here. Rather than call her, he sank into the antique leather chair placed behind the custom Carpathian elm desk that had sat in this office for generations.

Perhaps it was the combination of three weeks of travel and spending so much time in hotel rooms, but he was tired. Bone tired and in a foul mood. He'd gone on site in northern Canada to make sure the project met its deadlines, and it did—something that normally would have energized him. Instead, he felt distracted.

He didn't consider himself an emotional man. Ever since he'd taken over the family's company, his success had come from his ability to remain detached. Cogent Energy Solutions had been born in the oil wells of Texas, but Gio had taken it in a much different direction. He was an investor, not a developer. He found potential energy sources—like the Utica Shale veins recently discovered in North America—that others considered economically unfeasible to reap, financed the breakthrough technologies that would make harvesting them possible, contracted with companies who needed those sources, made a huge fortune, and then got out before the environmentalists even knew his name.

Clean.

Calculated.

Satisfying.

Until this past trip.

What is wrong with me?

His cell phone vibrated in his breast pocket. He checked the caller ID and groaned. It was his cousin Madison Andrade. Again. Her calls were becoming more frequent. He'd answered the first couple. Forwarded the next few to his secretary, Rena. Now he let her calls ring through to voice mail. Part of him was beginning to admire her tenacity, even as he remained unwilling to consider her request.

He placed the phone down on his desk and started sifting through the large pile of mail that had accumulated in his absence. Rena had opened and dealt with most of it, but one square ivory envelope was still sealed. He picked it up and turned it in his hand. He already knew what it was. Madison had told him to expect an invitation to Stephan Andrade's wedding.

An Andrade wedding.

What a joke. We may share the same last name, but that's all we have in common.

Gio crushed the invitation, still unopened, into a ball and threw it in the wastebasket beside his desk. *My mistake was reopening any communication with that side of the family. I have Luke to thank for that.*

Gio didn't speak to Luke often, but that lack of contact had more to do with their schedules than anything else. Of his three brothers, Luke was the easiest to get along with. He was a respected doctor and someone who never asked for anything, so Gio had been hard-pressed not to accept his request to join him at a high-profile function a few months earlier.

The event ended up being an engagement party for a couple he didn't know, much less care about. The unpleasant bonus had been the presence of two uncles he'd spent nearly a decade avoiding. He'd left as early as he could without seeming rude, and had made his excuses while interacting as little as possible with any of his extended family.

I should have told Luke I was out of the country that week.

I should have lied.

Gio's phone beeped to announce the message his cousin had left. *By going to that party, I mistakenly gave some family members the wrong idea.*

Now they think I care. I don't.

The days when what they do or say have any relevance to me are long gone. He would have said as much to Madison, but she had done nothing to him. As the frequency of her calls increased, however, he began to feel pushed into an uncomfortable situation. No one likes to shove a puppy away, but when it starts humping your leg, you have to.

Gio covered his eyes with one hand at the image. *Oh, my God. I am tired.*

Still too tense to consider heading home to bed, he loosened his tie and strode over to the office bathroom. His office was his home away from home, and the shower and assortment of clothing in its large closet was evidence of that.

He changed from his Kiton suit into his workout clothes and running sneakers. He'd had a full gym installed on the top floor of the Cogent Building, and he'd made it available to all his employees.

Not that anyone would be taking advantage of it that night, since the building was apparently empty. He took that irritation to the treadmill and started running, welcoming the initial discomfort as his tight muscles were pushed to stretch and perform. *Pain is weakness leaving the body. Best to work through it.*

As I always have.

An hour later, after completing a long run and doing a circuit of weights, Gio grabbed a towel and headed back down to his office. His blood was pumping and his mood had improved. Half-smiling, he considered calling one of his usual friends with benefits.

He reentered his secretary's office, then swore when he realized he had closed the door to his office, effectively locking his cell phone, keys, and everything else inside.

What the hell?

He picked up Rena's phone and called down to the security desk, but it rang repeatedly without being answered. Heads would roll the next morning.

Looking down at his secretary's desk, he noted the calendar. *September 1. Labor Day. No wonder the offices are empty.* It didn't explain the absent security, but it did reinstate his opinion of his usually dedicated secretary.

Angry for allowing himself to become distracted enough to lose track of the day, he impatiently searched the top of her desk. *Rena must have a key to my office.*

He tried the drawers of her desk but they were locked. Which made sense, he supposed. He wouldn't have appreciated if the key proved easily accessible. Still, her competence wasn't helpful at the moment.

Losing patience, he tugged at the top drawer more aggressively.

* * *

Seated at a security console in a small room on the Cogent Building's first floor, Julia Bennett neglected watching the monitors in favor of checking her makeup in her compact mirror. She hoped her brown hair held a sophisticated amount of curl. She still had the top of her security uniform on, but there wasn't much she could do about that for—her eyes flew to the clock on the wall—thirty more minutes.

She let out a nervous breath and smoothed her hands down the tight black skirt that ended a few inches above her knees. She glanced down at her Marc Jacobs four-inch heels, shoes that would not pass dress code, but would have to for one night. In twenty minutes, she would replace her tan blouse with a much bolder red silk one.

Red was a power color.

And she needed all the mojo she could muster.

The door to her security cave opened and Paul, one of the front-desk security men, shuffled in. He was a couple of years older than Julia and, due to the number of hours he put in at the gym each day, nearly twice her size. "Julia, can you cover

the front desk for me for a few minutes? I have to run across the street to the pharmacy. I won't be long."

Shit.

"Paul, I don't even know how to sign someone in."

"You won't have to. It's a holiday. No one is here. No one is coming. Listen, normally I would never ask you to do this, but you know that I'm on by myself tonight. Tom has a stomach bug." The six-foot-six giant of a man looked more like a sad little boy when he added, "I think he gave it to me. I probably have a fever. Feel my head. Do I?"

Dutifully, Julia stood, walked over, and touched his forehead, noting that he did feel overly warm. She glanced at the clock. Twelve past. *Shoot.* "You might. Tell me what you need. I can run over and get it."

He shook his head. "No. I have symptoms I don't want to discuss." He gave her a sheepish smile. "I've been in the bathroom half the night."

Although Julia had only worked at Cogent for a little more than a month, Paul and Tom felt like old friends. Working overnight shifts had given them many opportunities to bond over the coffee breaks Julia still needed to keep awake. Normally her job consisted of nothing more than watching a panel of monitors and reporting anything unusual to Paul or Tom. Not the most exciting job, but one that paid the bills.

Everyone had been so nice to her that she felt guilty about not instantly agreeing to Paul's request. "Okay, go. But hurry back. I put in to leave early. I feel awful, but I'm meeting that buyer tonight. This could be it—what I came to New York for."

"Is this the same guy you told me about the other day?"

"Yes. He works for Platinum and Onyx. It has stores all over the world. An order from him could change everything for me. Now, go. I'll watch the desk."

When she walked by him, Paul said, "That skirt is short for a business meeting."

She frowned over her shoulder at him. “I’m not going to sell to anyone if I keep dressing like a small-town bumpkin. Trust me, I’ve researched power outfits. This one says, ‘I’m a strong and vital woman. Buy my jewelry.’”

Paul looked unconvinced. “If you’re meeting a guy, that skirt says, ‘I’m hot, buy *me*.’”

Julia stomped one of her high heels in frustration. “To win in business, you have to take advantage of all of your assets. If he gets a little distracted by my skirt ... well, that’s the way of the jungle.”

Shaking his head, Paul said, “Call me if he turns out to be a creep. One of my buddies will meet you.” Having met some of his beefed-up friends, Julia had no doubt they would. They were brawn looking for a brawl.

“I won’t have to because I’m fierce. I have my whole presentation ready. He will be so wowed by the items I show him, he won’t have drool left for my legs.” She hovered behind Paul’s seat at the front security desk cautiously. *What are the chances he sanitized any of it?*

With a grunt of disapproval, Paul headed toward the large glass-door exit.

Julia couldn’t stop herself from calling out, “Hurry, Paul. I can’t be late.”

Julia paced behind the desk and watched the clock. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. *Crap, I should have brought my clothes out here. I could change in the ladies’ room while waiting.*

She sprinted back to the surveillance room to gather her things. While scanning the area to make sure she wasn’t forgetting anything, she noticed something on one of the monitors: a door to one of the administrative offices was open. All offices were supposed to be closed and secured after the cleaning staff left. Paul would hear about it in the morning if nothing were done. *Don’t forget to tell Paul about it. Don’t forget. Crap, I’m going to forget.*

Back at the front desk, Julia couldn’t stop thinking about that open door. *I can get up and back before Paul returns.*

She rushed to the elevator bank and pushed the button to the highest office floor. She flew across the carpeted hallway to the open office and had her hand on the doorknob when she noticed a tall man in sweatpants trying to break into the desk in the outer office.

She said the first thing that came to her head: “Halt right there.”

The man slowly straightened to an impressive height and turned. Julia gripped the door handle tighter. Eyes as dark as coal slowly raked over her, as if they had every right to. Gorgeous eyes. Thick, dark hair that was tussled just enough to set a woman’s imagination afire. Who knew burglars could be hot? *Yes, officer, I did tackle him, but I had to. It had nothing to do with those perfectly muscled shoulders and that flat stomach. I admit, we rolled around on the floor once or twice together, but purely so I could restrain him.*

Julia shook her head to clear it. *Down, libido, down. This is not one of those dreams where someone like him kisses someone like me, and I wake up frustrated and reach for my vibrator. This is reality, and even though he’s gorgeous, he could still be dangerous.*

One of his beautiful eyebrows arched at her prolonged appraisal of him, then his gaze settled appreciatively on the exposed length of her legs. “And you are?”

“Security.” She referenced her uniform and name tag. “You don’t belong in here.”

“You’re security?” he asked incredulously. “The singing or the stripping kind?”

Instantly angry, Julia put a hand on one hip and demanded, “Do I look like a stripper?”

His eyes slowly, ever so slowly, roamed over her high heels, short skirt, and riotous head of hair.

She stomped a foot at his lack of appropriate response. “This is a power outfit.” She looked down and tugged at her uniform top. “Not this. But it’s coming off.” When his eyes widened, her ire rose. “Not for you. And that’s not what I

meant. I have a beautiful red shirt that goes with this skirt. A nice conservative shirt. And this skirt is a perfectly appropriate length for a business meeting, according to *Entrepreneur Today*.” She took a deep calming breath. “Why am I justifying my outfit to a possible criminal? I don’t know what you’re doing here, but you need to leave.”

“Or what? What would you do?” He stepped closer.

Good question. Julia looked behind her, then back at him. *See, this is why I should have taken the salesperson job at the mall. But I thought, Night security—that will give me more time to read and network during the day. Where are you, Paul, when I need you? That’s it.* Paul. “I won’t have to do anything, because my partner is already on his way up. In fact, the next time that elevator opens, it’ll be him, and he is twice your size and has taken just enough steroids to have a little rage, if you know what I mean. I’ll do what I can to hold him off, but if he catches you, that gorgeous face of yours will never look the same.”

A predatory smile stretched his lips. He closed the short distance between them, effectively pinning her against the wall between his arm and the door. “I don’t believe you,” he said, his voice deep and husky. He studied her as if he were trying to solve a puzzle. “Are you going to tell me what you’re really doing here?”

Her voice tight in her throat, she said, “I told you. I’m security.”

He opened his mouth to say something, and Julia lost control. Attraction peaked and collided with panic. Her frantically searching hand closed on a lamp on the table beside them. With one swift move she cracked him in the temple with it. He stumbled back and raised a hand to the assaulted area. “What the hell ... ?”

They both froze. His eyes lit with a fire that set her heart racing.

In the doorway, a male voice broke in. “Mr. Andrade. Are you okay? What happened?”

Julia put the lamp down quickly and swayed a bit beneath the realization of what she had just done. “Mr. Andrade. As in, George Andrade?”

Still looming angrily over her, he said, “Gio. No one calls me George.” He addressed Paul curtly. “She works here?”

“Yes, sir. For over a month.”

Glittering black eyes bored into Julia as she smiled awkwardly back at him. “I didn’t recognize you.”

“Evidently.” He rubbed the red mark on his left temple.

Paul stepped forward with concern. “I’m so sorry, sir. This is my fault. I ran next door to get medicine—”

Gio held up one hand to silence Paul, and the gesture proved impressively effective. In this jungle, money trumps muscle, Julia thought sarcastically. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow. Right now—”

Tomorrow. Tonight. Time. Crap. Julia glanced at the clock. *Seven thirty. Shit.* She turned apologetically to Paul. “Oh, my God, Paul. I am so sorry. I’ll take the heat for this. I promise. This was all my fault. Write it up however you need to. I would, but I can’t stay. I’m already late.”

She made the mistake of meeting the eyes of the man who still looked dazed from his encounter with the lamp. She instinctively reached toward his temple in sympathy, then dropped her hand. “I’m sorry. I should have studied the photo book Paul gave me better. It’s just that you were dressed like ... and then you were all ...” She frowned. “You could have just told me who you were and none of this would have happened, but we don’t have time to go into that now. Don’t be mad at Paul, okay? He has a stomach bug. But normally, he’d die to protect you. Who else can you say that about?” She glanced quickly at the clock again and said, “I totally understand if you need to fire me, but can you do it tomorrow?”

She turned and fled.

After her whirlwind departure, Gio looked across at Paul. “Just tell me you didn’t issue her a gun.”

Chapter Two

Julia stepped out of the taxi and onto the busy sidewalk in midtown Manhattan. She hesitated for a moment, reread the address she held in her hand, then squared her shoulders, shifted her jewelry-laden messenger bag higher on her shoulder, and strode toward the entrance of what appeared to be a bar.

A bar? And if the crowd in the windows was any indication, a popular one at that. Julia stepped inside and tried to remain optimistic. With a live band? New Yorkers play by their own rules. Who needs to discuss business in an office when you can do it and watch live entertainment at the same time? This doesn't have to change anything. So, there won't be room for me to use the mini display case I made. I'll just show him individual pieces. The band began to play a fast song with a heavy bass line that virtually shook the photos hung on the wall. People stood shoulder to shoulder, and Julia squeezed between gyrating couples as she searched for a familiar face.

The scene was worlds away from the small ocean-town bars Julia was used to, but she didn't let her determination waver. *I'll go to an office, to a bar ... hell, I'll meet someone in a back alley ... I don't care. I will sell my jewelry in New York. This crowd, that band—they won't stop me.*

A roving hand caressed her derriere as she squeezed between a cluster of inebriated men. She spun on the offender and grabbed him by the collar of his neck, pulling him down so she could speak directly into his ear. "I grew up in a neighborhood of all boys. I will seriously fuck you up if you touch me again."

It wasn't true, but it didn't have to be. Not according to *The Power of Believing*, a book she had purchased to cheer herself up back in Rhode Island—a book that had changed her life. Want to succeed? Believe that you can. Want to intimidate someone? Believe that you are someone they should fear.

The drunken man took a step back and raised both of his hands in a move that showed he was backing away. That small triumph bolstered Julia's confidence. *I can do this.*

As she turned away from Mr. Wandering Hands, she saw Bill Pritt waving her over to a corner booth. She slid into the booth next to him with relief.

Dressed in an off-the-rack suit and tie, Bill looked exactly as she remembered him from the day she'd met him: a slightly out-of-shape businessman in his early forties. They'd both been hailing taxis on Fifth Avenue and, when one came, he'd offered to share the ride with her. A quick look at his left hand revealed he was married, and that had given Julia the reassurance she needed to join him. While the taxi navigated the heavy traffic, he'd asked her what brought her to the Diamond District, and the story of why she'd come to New York had spilled out of her.

She hadn't expected him to be interested, but he had listened attentively and then surprised her by telling her he worked for a large jewelry chain and was always scouting for new designers. They'd exchanged phone numbers and Julia had smiled her way through her shift that day. Their meeting had been a sign. Unable to help herself, she'd called everyone back home to tell them about the opportunity. *Now all I have to do is close the deal.*

Smiling down at her, he leaned in closer than she was personally comfortable with, but likely necessary given the deafening level of the music. "I was getting ready to leave. I thought you'd changed your mind."

Forcing a bright smile onto her face and shaking off the disaster the night had already been, Julia said, "Absolutely not. I was thrilled to get your call."

"I'm glad," he said and waved the cocktail waitress over. "Two dirty martinis."

"I don't actually ..." Julia almost said "drink," then thought better of it. *What am I going to ask for? A soda? Why not go all out and order a Shirley Temple? Remember, sophisticated. Strong. Of course I drink martinis.* "Thank you."

When they were alone again, Julia said, “I brought all kinds of samples with me. These are in copper and aluminum with fake gemstones,” she said, pulling a few pieces out of her bag. “I have a couple made with more expensive materials, but I don’t like to carry them around with me. Of course, if you put in an order, all of these will be made with the highest quality materials I can afford.” *Why did I add that last part? It makes me sound like ... like who I am. An amateur.* “I mean ...”

He put his left hand down on her thigh and gave it a suggestive squeeze. “Let’s not talk business yet.”

Julia sat up, grabbed his hand, and dropped it on the table as if it were a napkin that had fallen to the seat. The ring he’d worn the day they’d met was missing, but an indent was still visible. Julia’s mood downshifted in stages: Confusion. Disbelief. Then finally, a growing understanding that was accompanied by an overwhelming surge of disappointment and anger. “I thought you were interested in my pieces.”

“I am,” he said, his eyes glittering with an interest Julia didn’t welcome. “All of them.”

Skin crawling, Julia scooted back and stood, shaking her head in revulsion. “You’re married.”

He reached forward and grabbed her forearm. “My wife doesn’t care what I do.”

Julia shoved at his hand. “Don’t touch me.”

He didn’t release her. “Come on. Sit back down. You can show me what you brought with you if it’s so important to you.”

Just then, the cocktail waitress arrived with their drinks. With her free hand, Julia picked up one of the martinis and poured it over Bill’s head. He released her arm and cursed loudly.

Opportunities only come when you’re strong enough to take them on. This is good. It’ll toughen me up. Before walking away, Julia said, “I’m not sorry I came here tonight. You know why? Because you just made me very angry, and anger is a motivating emotion.” According to her second favorite book,

Stress to Success. With that, she spun and pushed her way through the crowd, hoping her bravado wouldn't fail before she found the door.

When she approached the area where Mr. Wandering Hands was still standing, he stepped back and tapped his friends to do the same so she could pass. Bag clutched tightly and head held high, she walked through the path they'd opened for her.

"I told you she's feisty," Mr. Wandering Hands said to his friends. "I'm in love."

She paused and glared at him. "You'd have a much better chance with women if you didn't grab at them as they walk past."

He blushed and ducked his head, and Julia guessed he was much younger than whatever his ID claimed.

Perfect way to round off the day.

Groped by a teenager. Propositioned by a married man.

And don't forget probably fired.

Julia exited the bar, hailed a cab, and tried to stem the tears that were welling within her. *I'll grow from this tomorrow. Right now I just feel like an ass.*

I'm such an idiot. That guy is probably not even a jewelry buyer. Why did I think I could do this? I'm not a businesswoman. I don't belong in New York City. What the hell am I doing?

She entered her building and walked up the three floors to her tiny studio apartment. Her phone rang.

"Jules. I know I shouldn't call you tonight, but I figured if you were still in your big business meeting you wouldn't answer."

"Hi, Dad," Julia said sadly as she opened the door to her apartment, then closed it heavily behind her. She hung her bag on the wall hook, stepped out of her shoes, and walked toward her bed that doubled as her couch. "How's Mom?"

“She’s doing well. We’re hopeful about the new doctor we’re using.”

“That’s good. That’s really good. Is she awake?”

“No, hon. She already went to bed for the night. The medicine makes her tired, but she isn’t as anxious when she gets confused. I told her you were doing well, and that made her happy. So, tell me. Which piece sealed the deal?”

Julia sank onto the corner of her bed and slumped forward. “I didn’t get it, Dad. He didn’t want my jewelry.”

“Then he’s an idiot. Don’t give him a second thought.” Julia almost smiled, remembering that her father had said close to the same thing about every boy she’d pined for since grade school. They didn’t make many men like her father—gentle giants who loved with every fiber in them. Julia had always loved it when her mother spoke of how they’d met. Elizabeth had been driving home to the Carolinas, down the East Coast, after graduating from college and had planned to drive through Rhode Island without stopping. Her car had overheated within state lines, and he had pulled over to offer help. Flirtation had led to coffee. The story was a little vague after that, but her mother had never made it home. She’d stayed and married her father, and together they’d built the family business, Bennett Wood Creations, which was part showroom and part factory. Her father was a gifted furniture designer and craftsman. Her mother had excelled at finding buyers and keeping the books. They’d made a good team—an artist and a business-minded woman.

Until Mom got sick.

Flopping back into the thick, flowered comforter on her bed, Julia confessed, “I may have also been fired from my job today.”

Just as she expected, her father’s support didn’t waver. “From the security gig? That’s not a career anyway. It’s a filler job. You’ll have another one before you know it.”

I wish I could believe that. “I don’t know, Dad. What if I don’t have what it takes to make it here?”

Her father cleared his throat. “You can always come home, Jules. You know that.”

“All it would take to get the books current is one good deal, Dad. I have to try.”

“It’s just a business, Jules. It’s not what matters.” The sadness in his voice tore at Julia’s heart. Her father would do anything for her and for his wife, but he wasn’t a businessman. He’d tried to downplay the seriousness of his situation, but Julia knew how close he was to losing everything.

Her mother would have known how to turn it around. She would have known exactly what to say to the bankers, who had begun pressuring her father to sell the land to local developers before they claimed it and auctioned it off themselves. The hardest part of Alzheimer’s was, although her mother was there, still laughing and playing cards with her father, the sharp woman she’d been was gone.

Leaving Dad and me to fend for ourselves.

And we were cut from the same dreamer cloth.

No, I will no longer limit myself with narrow definitions of who I am. I’m a reasonably intelligent person. I can learn to be a businesswoman.

I must have some of my mother in me.

It was that decision that had started Julia reading motivational business books. *Surround yourself with those you want to emulate. Want to land an opportunity? Put yourself where opportunities are plentiful. Want to be a business shark? Swim with sharks.*

Less than four hours from her home and boasting one of the world’s largest collections of jewelry businesses, New York had been a natural choice for Julia. Working nights allowed her to frequent the Diamond District and learn which pieces were selling and which weren’t. It was a culture shock, but not all bad. New Yorkers were sharply dressed, blunt in their speech, and willing to fight to death for a taxi. She respected them even as she struggled to keep up with them.

“It does matter, Dad. It matters to me.”

“It’s not a weight that belongs on your shoulders. I have some options I’m considering.”

Julia sat up and wiped her tears away. “Don’t do anything until I come home, Dad. This is going to work out. You and Mom have been the best parents anyone could ever ask for. I would still be selling my jewelry out of your furniture store if Mom hadn’t gotten sick. You always believed in me.”

“That’s what parents do, Jules.”

“No. Not all parents, Dad. Good parents. And I know I don’t have to do this for you. I want to do this. I will do this.”

With a voice that was thick with emotion, her father said, “New York is about to discover an incredible artisan. I believe that. You’ll find a buyer. You know why? Because you have your mother’s heart. She was always a scrapper. If this is what you feel you need to do, then you get back out there, Jules, and you fight for it. Not for Mom and me. But for you.”

Wiping away a fresh tear, Julia said, “I will, Dad. I’ll make you proud.”

“I’m already proud, Jules. Now go get some rest. Tomorrow is a whole new day. Love you.”

“Love you more,” Julia whispered and hung up. She fell back onto her bed and covered her eyes with one arm.

It won’t be hard for tomorrow to be better than today.

Although, today could have been worse. I could have accidentally killed Gio Andrade with that lamp instead of just stunning him. An image of her boss, eyes flashing with fury while he touched the wound on his temple, brought a fresh flush of color to her cheeks. Her breath caught as she remembered how he had looked when he’d turned around from his secretary’s desk—so arrogant, so in control.

Well, I knocked that right out of him.

She groaned at the memory.

And then actually wondered if he was attracted to me.

Because nothing is hotter than a good ol' smack to the side of the head.

I'm sure he's lying in his ridiculously plush bed thinking about me tonight.

Yeah, right.

Oh, my God. I'm going to be arrested when I go to work tomorrow.

* * *

Gio restlessly turned over in his bed. Another sleepless night. This time, however, he wasn't thinking about any of his international projects. Nor was he cursing his family for distracting him from more important matters.

No, tonight he was plagued by the image of a woman he had no business thinking twice about. If there was one rule Gio had always adhered to, it was never mix business with pleasure.

Rolling onto his back, he tested the tender skin on his bruised temple and winced. He should have told Paul to fire her on the spot. That crazy brunette was obviously completely unsuited for security work. Beyond not recognizing the owner of the business she was supposedly guarding, she was dangerously unpredictable.

A fact that didn't stop his cock from stirring to life at the memory of how her legs had seemed to go on forever. He shook his head and groaned as the movement sent a knifelike pain through his head. Still, his erection grew as his traitorous mind conjured images of what she would have looked like in just those high heels.

I should have let Ceci come over.

One of his welcome-home messages had been from his last hookup. She'd thanked him for the thoughtful gift he'd sent while he was away. He'd have to ask his secretary what it had been. He hoped she'd followed his normal rule of something generous that didn't promise anything more. The women he dated expected to be pampered, but they knew the score.

Sex was just sex.

And good sex, while necessitating the occasional diamond bracelet, did not require emotional investment or the hypocrisy of vows. Marriage might have made sense back when a person's life expectancy was forty, or when social norms dictated it, but he saw no reason for it in modern society.

Maybe for the sake of children.

But the world was already overpopulated—it could do with a few less of those, too. As his body continued to betray him and throb beneath the sheets, he rolled over again and punched one of his pillows. He didn't want Ceci; he wanted his little brunette security woman.

What was it about her that made her unforgettable? Was it the way she'd reprimanded him even after she knew who he was, seemingly unimpressed by his title and wealth? He couldn't remember a time when he'd been so easily dismissed by a woman. She'd seemed more concerned with upsetting Paul than him.

And I'm the one she hit.

That's probably all this is—a concussion.

If concussions come with the side effect of a raging hard-on.

His little security guard was beautiful, but beauty was common in his world. She was lean with a killer ass, but those were common traits, too. What had been novel was the way his gut had clenched with excitement whenever their eyes met. He wasn't an impulsive man, but he'd found himself cornering her, afraid she was an illusion conjured up by his exhaustion—a dream he didn't want to wake from.

Desire that intense is dangerous.

Complicated.

A weakness that topples empires.

Something I thought I was immune to.

I'm being ridiculous.

This is the result of too much work and several weeks of pent-up sexual frustration.

I'll call her into my office tomorrow, and in the light of day my cock will see the truth.

She's just a woman.

Nothing different than any other I've known.

Not worth risking anything for.

Chapter Three

“Rena, send Julia Bennett up as soon as she gets in.” He hated that he’d started his day unable to concentrate on his email and instead requested information on a woman he’d spent far too much of the night thinking, then dreaming, about.

He wasn’t happy with himself for succumbing to his curiosity and asking for background checks ASAP on all of the new hires, merely so he could find out more about her. No one needed to know that hers was the only folder he intended to open.

He’d half hoped to discover something big enough to negate the building anticipation he felt as he counted down the hours until her shift started. Unfortunately, what he’d read had left him more, not less, intrigued by her.

Although she had no experience with security, her flowered and scented résumé had somehow won over the head of human resources. Julia’s only prior employment had been at her family’s furniture business, where she claimed to have created a jewelry department and listed her skills as: Ask me.

For the third time that day, he opened the small handwritten card that had been paper-clipped to her résumé. She had warmly thanked the woman she’d interviewed with and written, “I know I’m not the most qualified person for the position, but I can guarantee you that no one wants it more than I do. I will come in early. I will work late. I don’t mind holidays or double shifts. Looking forward to hearing from you. Julia. P.S. I hope you don’t mind that I included a box of peppermint tea. During the interview you expressed that your sinuses were giving you trouble. I had my father overnight my favorite herbal blend. Our family swears by it.”

Since most of his business was conducted in the field, Gio wasn’t normally concerned with the level of security at his headquarters, but he could see the error in that now. He’d have that unpleasant conversation with his security team later.

For now he replaced the card in Julia's folder and shook his head.

This isn't me.

I don't sit around waiting for any woman.

Certainly not someone who works for me.

But I need to see her again.

I need to prove to myself that what I felt last night can't be repeated. He hadn't realized how emotionally closed off he'd become until he'd looked into the eyes of a woman who had made him uncomfortably aware of it. What Julia made him feel was just as unwelcome as the sensation of pins and needles that fills a limb after it's been temporarily cut off from blood.

And as impossible to dismiss.

He practically jumped out of his chair when he heard a light knock on his door. Not since his first teenage crush could he remember his heart beating so wildly in his chest at the idea of seeing someone again.

Rena opened the door. "I have the soil analysis you asked me for." She stepped inside, placing them on his desk. Instead of leaving as she normally did, she hovered. "Are you feeling okay, Gio? Is your head still bothering you? I have some aspirin in my purse if you need it."

"I'm fine," Gio ground out. Rubbing a hand over the small red mark on his temple, he added, "Thank you."

"You asked me to remind you to call Mr. Atwater today. I did earlier, but his secretary called a few minutes ago. She wanted you to know he's in his office late tonight. I wasn't sure if that meant you had forgotten. I told her I'd tell you."

Cursing under his breath, Gio stood. "He can wait. He needs my investment more than I need the opportunity."

"Yes, sir." She went halfway to the door and stopped. "Miss Elson called this morning. I told her you were in meetings all day."

“Good. I broke it off with her before I left. I hope you sent her nothing more than the usual.”

“The three-carat ‘thank you now go away’ bracelet that Tiffany’s buys in bulk just for you? Sent it with the usual note,” Rena replied blandly, still remaining in the room. It was times like this when Gio regretted hiring his friend Kane’s sister as his administrative assistant. She was good at her job, but she often felt personally invested in things that were none of her business.

Gio leaned back against his desk and folded his arms across his chest. “Say it.”

“Aren’t you getting tired of this cycle? Dating women you don’t care about and then breaking up with them as soon as they get attached to you?”

For a moment Gio was back in Kane’s house in upstate New York. He and Kane had become fast friends in middle school, and their friendship has survived eighteen years and Kane’s inquisitive sister. “I thought you didn’t like her. Want me to call her, give it another shot?”

Rena rolled her eyes and shuddered. “No. I’m pretty sure she’s a vampire. All that pasty white skin, perfect makeup, and cold hands. I know she’s the face of Umi Cosmetics, but they should let her eat something now and then. Maybe she’d smile.”

Against his will, Gio chuckled. “She wasn’t that bad.”

“Not to you.”

Losing some patience with the topic, Gio said, “I’ll call her. She knows the score, though. I never lied to her.”

“Lied to who?” Nick Andrade, Gio’s very silent business partner and younger brother, asked as he sauntered into the office in his custom gray Corneliani suit that had never seen the inside of a boardroom. “You broke it off with Miss Cosmetics already? Damn. I’m going to miss her. She was gorgeous.”

Rena made a sound of disgust deep in her chest. “I don’t know which one of you is worse.”

Nick smiled suggestively and wiggled his eyebrows in the disarming manner that won him more female attention than was good for him. “That’s because you won’t give me a chance to show you how good I really am.”

“It’s a struggle, but I take it one day at a time.” Rena rolled her eyes dramatically. Gio would have told Nick to back off, but the two of them had bantered like that for as long as he could remember. And Nick was smart enough to know that if he ever actually made a play for Rena he wouldn’t live long. Either Gio or Kane would put a quick end to it.

Nick’s eyes narrowed. “Luckily, I didn’t come here for you. I came to see Gio.”

Years of frustration with his brother’s disinterest in the family company surfaced as a barb. “Putting in your one day of work this year? It’s only September.”

Plopping down in a chair in front of Gio, Nick propped his feet up on the leather antique chair across from him. “I may come to work every day now. I don’t know what I did to deserve it, but I love it, Gio.”

Gio reached down and shoved his brother’s feet to the floor. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“The Barbie doll of a chauffeur you hired for me. She can drive me anywhere. She thought I wanted to come here, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her no, so here I am.” His smile grew wider. “Then I met my swimsuit model of a secretary and I knew it couldn’t be an accident. What do you want, Gio? I’m in. Just tell me I can keep them.”

Gio looked across at Rena and frowned. “Get rid of them.”

Rena turned on Nick. “I hope you’re happy. Two very nice women are about to lose their jobs. Why? Because—”

Nick’s expression darkened. “Because my brother has no sense of humor.”

Gio sighed. “You don’t have to fire them. Transfer them.”

She nodded, glared at Nick one final time, and left.

Nick stood. “You’re always in a bad mood, so this is probably a ridiculous question—but did something happen I should know about?”

The question hit too close to the truth. In no conceivable scenario would he discuss what was bothering him with his brother, so he chose a topic that needed addressing. “I didn’t close the Westport deal.”

“No?” Nick’s surprise was genuine. Then he relaxed and said, “I’m sure it’s only a matter of time. You always get what you want.”

Gio returned to his desk and sat. “Not always. I can’t seem to keep you out of the papers.”

Nick shrugged. “She said they were separated. Her husband only leaked the story because he was caught getting his own on the side. Does it really matter?”

“Her husband is an old buddy of one of the bidders for the land lease. He outbid me, just to screw with us. So, yes, it matters. I don’t care if you never sit in a board meeting or answer one goddamn email I send you. You make sure your personal life does not affect this business. Are we clear?”

Nick’s face reddened with anger. “Crystal. Cogent is all that really matters. It’s all that ever has.”

As the two brothers faced off, Gio glimpsed the past in his brother’s eyes. Nick never understood the decisions Gio had made for the family. He likely never would.

Nick stood at the door as if he wanted to say something more, then turned and strode out the office.

Gio let out a long breath. As children, he and Nick had dreamed of running the family business together. Only two years apart, they’d once been close. He didn’t normally waste time regretting the part he’d played in changing that.

The past was where it belonged.

Dead and gone.

A light knock on the door broke his thoughts.

“Miss Bennett is here to see you.”

* * *

A few moments earlier, as she'd entered the Cogent Building, Julia had smoothed her hands down the tan slacks of her security uniform and struggled to come up with an excuse for her behavior the night before. Her hair was neatly braided. Her makeup was minimal. Hopefully Mr. Andrade would understand that she hadn't been herself last night.

What do you say to a man you assaulted with a lamp the night before?

You look well, Mr. Andrade.

No, he'll think I'm being sarcastic.

Sorry, sir. It was either clock you with a lamp or wrestle you to the floor, and I was afraid I'd enjoy the latter too much.

No. No. No.

Honesty is not always the best policy.

A small smile pulled at her lips as she remembered how tempted she'd been to run her hands up those fabulous abs and kiss the arrogance right out of him. She shook her head. Grabbing the lamp in a desperate move, born in the confusion of unexpected passion, was not likely the best excuse to use either.

It was a matter of hit you or hit on you, sir.

Yeah, that's not going to work.

I'm screwed.

Maybe I'm worrying for nothing. He won't want to see me. CEOs don't handle this kind of thing themselves. He probably spoke to Paul's supervisor.

I'll get a written reprimand.

Maybe a verbal one, too.

I hope I didn't get Paul in too much trouble.

Breathe.

I'll make it right. I'll write up my report first thing and submit it. The whole thing was my fault. I'll make that clear.

As she stepped farther into the foyer, she stopped midstep. Two new security guards sat in Paul and Tom's seats. They were dressed in the same uniforms, but neither smiled as she approached their desk. One of them walked out from behind their station and stood at military-like attention in front of her. "Mr. Andrade requested that you report to his office as soon as you arrive."

He wants to see me.

Oh, my God, he wants to see me.

Don't get excited. This isn't a good thing.

"I should put my bag in the monitor room," Julia hedged and took a side step in that direction. *While I figure out what I'm going to say. And get this smile off my face or he'll never believe that I'm sorry about last night.*

The guard stepped in front of her and blocked her way. "We have coverage in there already," he said, looking past her as if dismissing her.

Coverage? The word was an unwelcome dose of reality.

Because I hit him, not because he spent the night, as I did, imagining what would have happened between us if I hadn't.

"Am I fired? Where are Paul and Tom?" Julia demanded as her agitation grew.

She might as well have asked two stone statues, for all their expressions gave away. The stoic wall of muscle merely repeated, "Please report to Mr. Andrade's office."

Julia looked back and forth between the two men, then asked, in a confidential tone, "Would you tell me if the police were up there? Blink twice fast if they are."

Neither man reacted at all.

Nothing.

Fine.

I can't be arrested for hitting someone I thought was an intruder.

Hopefully.

Head held high, she strode to the elevator with purpose. It was only once she was inside that she hugged her arms around her waist for a moment and let out a nervous breath.

How you respond to adversity determines the level of success you will achieve. She quoted the chapter heading from one of the books she'd been reading, using the words to calm herself. None of the books, however, soothed the gnawing feeling in her gut—because she was more nervous about how her body would respond to her boss than afraid he'd fire her.

Maybe I'll get in there and realize that I'm not attracted to him at all. I was excited about meeting with a buyer. My adrenaline was probably running high. I'll see him again, feel nothing, and have something to laugh about with my friends when I go home.

Stepping out of the elevator, she headed into Mr. Andrade's outer office and faced her fear. *Or I'll make a complete fool of myself by staring longingly at him while he tries to explain why I'm no longer employed here—or worse, has me hauled off in cuffs.*

Her heart was beating so loudly in her ears she didn't actually hear if Mr. Andrade's secretary said, "Wait while I announce you," or "Follow me, please." Julia stood frozen near Rena's desk.

Rena held the door to her boss's office open, said something to the man waiting inside, then turned back to Julia and said, "Are you ready?"

Yes.

No.

"Is he alone?" Julia asked, hating that her voice sounded nervous.

"Yes," Rena said and waved her forward.

Forcing her reluctant feet toward the open office door, Julia sought one last reassurance. “Does he look angry?”

With a sympathetic smile, Rena peeked in at her boss, gave Julia a conspiratorial wink, and whispered, “Always. But he’s all growl and no bite. If he yells at you, just cry. He can’t handle that.”

Julia found herself smiling back at the woman she’d spoken to only once before as they’d shared a coffee break in the downstairs café.

Want to be a shark? Swim with the sharks.

I should write to that author and have him add:

Want to survive meeting a shark?

Be nice to his secretary.

Julia mouthed, “Thank you,” as she walked past Rena, then tried not to turn and bolt as the door closed behind her. She forced herself to walk across the room until she was just a few feet in front of Mr. Andrade’s desk. When she couldn’t put off the inevitable any longer, she raised her eyes from the carpeting and met his.

Wham.

There it was.

From the nervous flutter in her stomach to her wildly thudding heart, there was no denying the intensity of the attraction. He held her eyes, stood, and approached her.

The air between them sizzled, and she knew in that moment he felt it, too; that indescribable pull that defies logic.

Everything Julia had thought she’d say flew out of her head. She stood, immobile, barely breathing as he closed the distance between them. She licked her bottom lip nervously, and his eyes locked to that movement before returning to hers.

He didn’t look happy, but he did look ... hungry. He bent so close to her that if she went on her tiptoes their lips would meet. He hovered, as if he, too, were testing what neither of them could deny.

Down, libido. There are reasons why this man is off limits.

Good reasons.

I can't think of any right this minute, but they will come to me.

The room around them disappeared. Everything beyond him faded into the background—insignificant when compared to how he made her feel. *Is this the zing people speak of?*

“Did you make your date last night, Miss Bennett?” he asked.

Julia swallowed nervously. “It wasn’t a date. Well, it shouldn’t have been a date. It was supposed to be a business opportunity, but ...” She let her words trail off as she realized she was rambling. She cleared her throat. “Yes, I made it there on time.”

“I’m relieved to hear it. I’d hate to think that your job here impeded your social time.”

“It doesn’t,” she said quickly before she realized he was being sarcastic. Since she’d only worked for her parents, Julia wasn’t used to having a boss. She didn’t hide her irritation with him. “I was scheduled to leave early.”

He studied her for a moment, then said, “You didn’t recognize the CEO of the company you work security for. And then you attacked me.” He touched his bruised temple. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t fire you.”

His brusque tone increased Julia’s nervousness. She reminded herself what his secretary had said: He’s all growl and no bite. *I wonder if he’s the same in bed, because that would be a shame. A nip from him might be nice.* She bit her lip and chastised herself. *Stop that. This is serious.* In desperation, she said the first repeatable thing that came into her head. “Because I’ve proven that I’m serious about defending your office?”

He frowned. “Do you find this situation amusing, Miss Bennett?”

No, just my reaction to you. Julia lowered her eyes and remembered how he'd looked in his workout clothes. She'd thought he looked sexy in those, but he also looked amazing in a suit. *I bet he's one of those lucky few people who also look good naked. Not everyone can pull that off, but I bet he does.* "No, Mr. Andrade."

"Do you believe that you're suited for your job?"

Julia look up and met his eyes. "It's not hard. It's just watching the monitors. Nothing happens at night so it gives me plenty of time to read."

He cocked his head to one side and narrowed his eyes. "While you're working?"

She played her comment back in her head and groaned. "That didn't come out right. Of course I don't read in the surveillance room. If I did, I wouldn't be watching the monitors, would I? And I watch them. Very closely. All night." She rounded her eyes innocently for emphasis.

He leaned in and looked as if he was about to say something, then changed his mind. "That's all, Miss Bennett."

Unsure of what that meant, Julia didn't move. "I'm sorry?"

"You can go now."

She turned to leave, then turned back and asked, "Do I still work here?"

He covered his eyes with one hand and rubbed them as if her question caused him pain. "Yes."

Not giving him time to change his mind, Julia fled from his office. As she rushed by Rena's desk, the secretary asked, "So, how did it go?"

"Hard to say," Julia said and kept walking. *As long as he can't read minds I'm in the clear.*

Chapter Four

Gio fought and won against the desire to call her back in. *I shouldn't have brought her up here in the first place. I should have called the head of security and let him deal with it.*

But I had to see her again.

He'd wanted to reassure his cock that she was nothing special. *See, just another woman.* Unfortunately, for reasons he couldn't explain, she was more than that. When she spoke he had a difficult time concentrating on anything beyond how she would cry out in that sweet voice, begging him to go deeper, while he pounded into her.

Around her, he felt dangerously impulsive, and that was completely uncharacteristic of him. In his family, he was the reliable one. He had taken over Cogent Solutions after his father's death because he'd been the natural choice, not because it was something he wanted. No one had debated the decision or asked how he felt about it. He hadn't even asked himself.

Family was about duty—sustaining and protecting it.

Decisively.

Orderly.

The women he dated understood that he didn't want more than a casual, sexual relationship. They didn't ask questions, they didn't sleep over, and when it was over they moved on to another wealthy man. No hard feelings. No complications. Jealousy was for men who couldn't find another woman, and that had never been a problem for Gio.

He was generous with the women he dated. He gave them enough jewelry to make even the most jaded of them smile. He took them to the posh places wealthy people went when they wanted to be seen. The society pages in almost any city he visited ran photos of him with whomever he was dating. To many of these women, their representation in the media was

more important than what happened behind closed doors. It was a reality of his world and something he accepted.

The papers called him one of Manhattan's most eligible bachelors. His friends called him lucky. He didn't feel one way or another about either title.

In private affairs as well as in business, the one with the clear head won. Emotions were a distraction. They led to chaos and poor decisions.

Speaking of chaos.

He touched the small mark on his temple and smiled.

What is wrong with me? Instead of firing her, I just stood there imagining what it would be like to bend her over the back of that couch and claim her as mine. His half-cocked erection was an uncomfortable reminder of the intensity of his attraction to her.

She's off limits.

She works for me, for God's sake.

Forget her.

Gio walked back to his desk and tossed Julia Bennett's folder on top of the others. He threw himself into work for the next several hours, only checking his watch when he noticed the sun had gone down. Nine o'clock. He stood and stretched.

Rena would be long gone. *Thank God.* He didn't want to discuss anything from the night before with her.

He called downstairs to have his car brought around to the front. He often left the building through the lower garage, but tonight he decided to leave through the front foyer. He paused in front of the security station. The two temporary security guards looked fresh from military training. They stood as soon as they saw him exit the elevator.

He nodded to them and couldn't help scanning the area behind them. One of the doors behind them led to the surveillance room, but he wasn't sure which one. Julia Bennett was back there somewhere.

Reading, probably.

He shook his head ruefully.

He should be irritated by that knowledge, but instead he wondered what topics held her interest. He forced himself to walk away, even though, he admitted, he really wanted to find her and ask her.

Ridiculous.

* * *

Julia sighed audibly as she watched Gio Andrade leave the building on one of the monitors. He probably always walked through the foyer, but she let herself imagine he'd done it because he'd wanted to see her again.

There is nothing wrong with a healthy fantasy life, as long as you don't act upon it. Julia chuckled. She felt like she was back in high school, suffering from her first big crush. The difference was, no crush had ever made her feel quite so much like ripping her clothing off.

Maybe my menstrual cycle is going haywire. She'd read a study done on women during different times of the month. During ovulation, they were attracted to strong, aggressive men. The narrator had claimed this was due to an instinct to mate with the hardest of the breed. Later in the month, women would find nicer, softer men attractive. *No, I'm pretty sure I'd think he's hot every day of the month.*

Her usual motivational reading material was put aside for the night. Instead, she used her phone to do an Internet search on the man she couldn't get out of her head. Interestingly enough, there were very few articles of substance on him. Almost every article had featured him with a new woman on his arm. Gio taking an heiress to the ballet. Gio and a movie star at a fund-raiser. The cameras loved him. No matter how hard she searched, she'd yet to come up with an embarrassing photo, or anything that mentioned how he'd made his money.

Why am I wasting my time reading about a man who has certainly already forgotten about me? She closed her eyes,

hoping it would help clear her head, but he was just as vivid in her imagination:

I can see it now. He'd crash the door of my office open and say, "Miss Bennett."

Julia rested her head on her hands, letting the fantasy come to life. In her mind, her voice was sexily husky. *"You shouldn't be here, Mr. Andrade."*

He'd loosen his tie and throw it on the floor. Julia rewound the moment in her head. No, he'd toss it on the back of the chair. That's an expensive tie.

"Call me Gio. Practice saying it, because you'll be screaming it all night."

Would he be that crass?

Julia started their conversation over.

"You shouldn't be here, Mr. Andrade."

He'd walk over and hold out a hand to me. "I couldn't stay away from you."

I'd take his hand and stand before him. "You know this is wrong."

"How could it be when it feels this good?"

She imagined his lips on hers and smiled. *He would definitely know how to kiss. I'd try to remain strong. I'd push him back, playfully protesting. "What about all those other women?"*

"They mean nothing to me. They never have. You're the only one who—"

The phone on her desk rang, cutting off whatever Dream Gio would have said. She opened her eyes and answered the landline. The super-serious replacement security guard said, "Mr. Andrade has left the building. The cleaning staff is also gone for the night. That should be everyone. Have you seen any stragglers?"

Julia sat up and straightened her shirt. "No," she said. "I haven't seen anyone." She moved her purse completely off the

desk so it was no longer blocking one of the screens. “But you’ll be the first to hear if I do.”

The security guard hung up without further comment.

Julia leaned back in her chair and looked at the ceiling. *Stop daydreaming. Focus on what’s important and be grateful you still have a job.*

Remember why you’re in New York.

Julia leaned down and pulled a magazine out of her purse. She flipped to the article that had inspired her purchase: “Visualizing Your Way to the Top.”

A flash of how Gio would look beneath her, grinding upward into her while she threw her head back in abandon, warmed her cheeks. *I have no problem visualizing it at all. That’s the problem.*

Julia dropped the magazine back into her bag and tried to focus on the monitors. Nothing unusual, but that was no surprise. She rubbed her tired eyes. Only five more hours until her shift was over.

It’s going to be a long night.

Chapter Five

The next evening Julia let out a sigh of relief at seeing familiar faces sitting at the security desk. She walked over to the front of their station and said, “You both look like you’re feeling better. I’m glad you’re back. Paul, I am so sorry about the other night.”

Slightly older than Paul, Tom was the veteran on their security team and almost always a voice of reason. “It’s hard to believe either of you are still employed here. Can’t I take a day off without all hell breaking loose?”

Paul shrugged and smiled sheepishly. “Hey, I was sick. If you’d been here, I wouldn’t have had to ask Julia to cover the desk, but you took the night off.”

The two men bickered more like brothers than coworkers.

Julia was moved to voice her apology again. “Paul, I feel awful about—”

He waved her concern off. “Eh, don’t worry. I got a warning and a note in my file. Nothing big. How about you? Everyone has been tight-lipped about you actually attacking Mr. Andrade. What did you get?”

Close enough to him that my nights have been filled with spicy dreams about him? Julia choked that honest answer back. “The same. I’m just glad it blew over.” Julia hitched her purse on her shoulder and said, “I guess I should get back there.”

Paul interrupted. “Hey, you didn’t say what happened with your jewelry guy.”

Tom said, “Paul, don’t make her say it. She would have told us if she had good news.”

“Just because you’re married now doesn’t mean you suddenly have deeper insights into everyone with a vagina. Julia and I are friends. Don’t tell me how to talk to her.”

“First, I don’t know a man who uses the word ‘vagina.’ Never say it again. Second, unlike you, I have sisters. You can make a woman cry if you bring up something she failed at. They’re sensitive.”

“How do you know she failed? She may have nailed it.” Paul turned to Julia. “What happened?”

She covered her eyes with one hand and groaned.

Tom said, “See now you’ve upset her. I told you to drop it.”

“Stop telling me what to do.”

“Someone has to. You have the social skills of a gorilla and the vocabulary of an adolescent.”

“Vagina. Vagina. Vagina.”

“That’s really mature.”

The banter of the two overly muscled security guards pulled Julia back from her inner pity party. She lowered her hand and half smiled. “Paul, you were right. The skirt was too short. He wasn’t interested in buying my jewelry. A total creep. And he was married.”

Paul was on his feet in a heartbeat. “Did he touch you? You tell me where he lives and I’ll break his legs.”

Tom frowned and said, “I can’t help Paul. My wife would kill me. But I know someone who does that kind of thing cheap.”

There was something wonderfully reassuring about their support, even if it was a little extreme. “It’s fine, guys. I should have known something was up when he didn’t want to meet me where he worked. He probably isn’t even a buyer. I have a lot to learn about living in the city.”

Paul came around the podium and gave her a hug. “You’re a beautiful woman, Julia. Guys can’t help but want to fuck you.”

Julia pulled back at his words and burst out laughing. Although many women would have found Paul physically attractive, Julia had never viewed him as a romantic

possibility. He said whatever came to his mind. Julia had gotten used to his candor, but she couldn't take him seriously.

He stepped back, seeming to be shocked by his own admission. Then he smiled and shrugged. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

Tom said, "Get over here, Paul. You went too far. You were doing fine ... and then you had to cross the line. That's why you're still single. It's your mouth. And, Julia, stay away from Paul. He has a hard enough time concentrating without you as a distraction."

Julia and Paul stood there for a moment longer, smiling guiltily like children who'd just been lectured. Over the last month, the three of them had gotten into this playful cycle of ribbing each other. It was harmless and started all of their days with a smile.

Still laughing, Julia turned her head to the surveillance room and crashed into a much more refined wall of muscle. One that sent a sledgehammer of heat through her. She raised her eyes slowly, shuddering with pleasure as his two strong hands steadied her. If the dark expression on his face was anything to go by, he was not as happy to see her. Barely above a whisper, she said, "Mr. Andrade."

"Miss Bennett," he said curtly, but his hands remained on her arms. "I'd like to speak with you for a moment."

Julia looked back at Paul and Tom and grimaced. "I'll be right back."

Gio put a hand forcibly on Julia's lower back and guided her to the first floor café, which was busy in the mornings but in the evenings was closed and deserted. Once inside, they stood facing each other, so closely that Julia was sure he'd be able to hear what his nearness was doing to her heartbeat.

"Cogent Solutions has a strict no-dating policy among coworkers. That includes the members of my security team," he said harshly.

So much for how I imagined this conversation would go. Julia blushed and pointed in the direction of the security desk.

She hoped he hadn't heard what Paul had said to her. "We were just kidding around. It's harmless."

He leaned a little closer and Julia quickly looked down, afraid her eyes would reveal how he was making her feel.

"You should be more careful, Miss Bennett. A man could get the wrong impression about you."

Her eyes flew up to clash with his. "I appreciate your concern, Mr. Andrade, but it's unnecessary. I get along well with both Tom and Paul. We sometimes laugh. It's what people do when they work together."

"I don't like him near you." His eyes burned into hers.

Her breath caught in her throat. She shook her head, sure that she had misunderstood what she'd heard. "I'm sorry?"

He brushed a thumb softly across her lower lip. "You heard me." He dropped his hand, spun on his heel, and walked away.

Julia stood rooted to the spot until Gio was out of sight. She sank down into one of the wooden chairs and let out a shaky breath.

I heard you.

I just wish I hadn't.

It was one thing to fantasize about him. That was harmless. It was completely different and even scary to consider for a moment that he might be attracted to her. *Men like him don't date women like me.*

He might try to for a one-night stand.

Maybe he considered it amusing to step outside his usual diet of models to flirt with a regular woman, but in no one's universe was it a good idea to even consider getting involved with him.

I should have told him I have a boyfriend.

I should have told him it wasn't appropriate to talk to me like that. But what did I do? I just stood there staring at him like some easy mark. No wonder he thinks I'm interested. I make a complete fool out of myself every time I see him.

I can't hide in here forever.

Julia stood and straightened her shoulders with determination. *Nothing happened. Nothing is going to happen. For all I know, he was teasing me. Maybe he has a sick sense of humor.* She shook it off and walked past Tom and Paul, hoping they wouldn't ask her what the great Mr. Andrade had wanted.

Tom pushed his chair back and stood at her approach. "Julia and the boss? When were you going to tell me about this?"

Paul defended himself. "I didn't know. The last time I saw the two of them she was trying to kill him with a lamp."

"This is not good. You have to talk to her."

"Me? You're the one who is so great with women."

Julia broke into their stage-whispered conversation. "I'm fine, Guys. It's not what you're thinking."

With a shake of his head, Tom sat back down. "You're an awful liar, Julia. I've never seen Mr. Andrade do anything inappropriate, but it's obvious he's interested in you. Avoid him. I don't want to see you get hurt."

Julia nodded, rushed to the privacy of her monitor room, closed the door, leaned back, and closed her eyes. Was it possible that Tom was right?

Was Gio seriously interested in her?

And if he was, how was she going to find the strength to avoid him?

By reminding myself that getting involved with him will only lead to heartache? That it would be a distraction I don't need right now?

Julia sank back into the chair behind the monitors and laid her forehead down on her folded hands.

If I know all of that, why can't I get this stupid smile off my face?

* * *

Gio paced his home office in his Upper West Side penthouse apartment. He'd brought work home with him, but it was still tucked, untouched, in his briefcase. Although he notoriously worked late, he'd thought a different location would help clear his head.

So far, it wasn't helping.

He couldn't concentrate. He groaned as he remembered what he'd said to Julia in the café. She brought out a possessive side of him he hadn't known he had. He'd wanted to rip her away from the security guards when he'd seen her laughing with them.

He told himself to keep walking. It was none of his business who she spoke to, who she laughed with, unless it affected her job performance. Even then, he wouldn't normally have wasted his time by getting involved. He would've mentioned it to Rena and she would've sent an email to the head of the security department.

He had never imagined himself as the type of man who would proclaim he was uncomfortable with any woman's relationship with her coworkers; like some jealous boyfriend.

And that's what made Julia dangerous.

He wasn't himself around her.

I should just fuck her and get it over with.

Nothing breeds contempt better than familiarity. By trying to deny whatever this is, I'm giving it an artificial importance.

For all I know she lives with someone. She may have dated half the men at Cogent while I was away. That possibility alone should be enough to keep me away from her. Getting involved with Julia could get complicated. He didn't do complicated.

He opened the doors to his balcony and stepped outside, hoping the fresh air would return some of his sanity. As he looked over the skyline of the city, he wondered if what he felt for Julia was merely a side effect of how he'd been feeling lately.

A few months ago, if someone had asked him how he felt about his life he would have said he was comfortable with where he was and what he was doing. His business was thriving. Any drama that had existed within his family was in the distant past. His social life was full, even if it was unexciting when compared to his brother Nick's.

Unfortunately he had made the mistake of attending a summer function with the side of his family he normally avoided. Seeing his uncles again had rekindled memories of betrayal. And, much like with Julia, he didn't like how those old emotions threatened the calm he had worked so hard to achieve.

Every time Madison Andrade contacted him, he was reminded of how fake that side of the family was. His uncles often spoke of love and family loyalty, but when he and his brothers had needed them the most, they had proven how hypocritical and self-serving they were. He wouldn't be fooled by them twice.

Maybe it's time for me to take a page out of my brother's book and do something I want to do.

Or, rather, someone I want to do.

A little complication might be just the distraction I'm looking for.

Chapter Six

A few days later, Julia checked the messages on her phone from the window seat on a public bus. She wasn't worried about missing her stop since she knew the route well. This was a ride she took as many days as she could. Down to the Diamond District with her bag that doubled as a display case for her jewelry.

Her phone rang.

"Julia." Her father's ever-cheerful voice rang clear across the miles. "What are you up to today?"

She smiled into the phone. "The usual. I try to pitch to one new jewelry store each day."

"You must be a pro by now."

"Or something," she said with some irony. She didn't know if she was getting better at pitching her jewelry, but she was definitely becoming more experienced doing it.

"I am so proud of you."

"Thanks, Dad. Eventually one of the stores is going to buy my line. Or, I will have the dubious title of being one of the few people who has met every single jeweler in New York City."

"Just be yourself, Julia. That's the best sales pitch."

"I'm not sure I should take advice from someone Mom used to hide from customers."

"That's only because when they asked me for my opinion I would give them my honest answer. Your mother is much more diplomatic than I am."

"How is she?"

Her father was quiet for a moment. "She had a good day yesterday. I took her to the ocean. Do you remember the beach she always took you to when you were little? The one with the

abandoned stone building next to it? You used to picnic in front of it. Then you always begged her to take you inside. She'd tell you that it wasn't a good idea, but the two of you would go in anyway. She told me it was your fault. You used to pretend you knew the last owners and would insist that you'd promised you would take care of their old place. Your mother always did have a weak spot for dreamers."

"She told you that yesterday?"

"No, honey, she didn't remember the place."

Julia bit her lip and looked sadly down at her lap. For just a moment, she had let herself believe in what she knew was impossible. "I thought you said she was doing much better on her new medication."

Her father's tone was gentle. "She is. We had a good day together. That's what's important right now. She's happy. That's all I care about. I want that for you too, Julia. Whether it's in New York or here with us ... whether you sell every piece of jewelry you make, or you discover you want something else entirely, it doesn't matter. Just find something that makes you happy."

The bus began to fill and a woman sat down in the seat next to Julia. The glare the woman gave her was a not-so-subtle hint to end the call. "I have to go, Dad. I'll call you tomorrow."

Julia was about to return her phone to her purse when it rang again. "Did you forget something?" she asked with a laugh.

"Julia," a familiar male voice said, sending instant shivers of desire through her.

"Mr. Andrade?"

"Call me Gio. I need to see you tonight."

"About my job?"

"No," he said simply, and Julia felt her face warm with embarrassment.

“I work the overnight shift,” she said and turned her face toward the window of the bus.

“I’m sure your boss will understand if you call in sick.”

Julia chewed her bottom lip, then said, “This isn’t a good idea.”

“No, it’s a very, very bad idea, but one I hope you find as irresistible as I do. Say yes, Julia.”

And there it was—confirmation of the desire she thought she’d seen in his eyes. Her body clamored in response to the knowledge that their attraction was mutual. Perhaps because she was fresh from speaking with her family, but his offer—although tempting—was one that she knew she had to refuse. “I can’t.” She grasped at a reason. “I don’t like to call in. I would feel too guilty to enjoy myself.”

“Tomorrow night then.”

“I’m scheduled every night straight through the weekend.”

Impatiently, Gio said, “Am I missing something? Your file said you were single.”

Irrked by his assumption that she should jump at an invitation from him, Julia said, “Is it inconceivable that a woman would say no to you, Mr. Andrade?”

“This isn’t about any woman. It’s about you.”

Julia swallowed hard. *This is real. How easy would it be to say yes to him? To temporarily forget about why I’m in New York City? To throw caution to the wind just this once?*

Then what?

He rarely dated a woman long enough to be photographed with her more than once.

I don’t want to be just another name on some rich man’s list of conquests. “Considering the women you’re usually seen with, I’m flattered. But my answer is no, Mr. Andrade.”

Julia hung up the phone and held it against her chest.

The woman next to her looked over and asked, “Married man?”

Julia shook her head.

“Old and ugly?”

Julia smiled. “He’s actually gorgeous.”

“Then you are a fool, honey. It’s hard to find a man in the city.”

The bus pulled over to her stop. Julia stood, squeezed past everyone, and exited the bus with a sigh of relief. *I’m glad I said no. Even if he were the last single man in New York City, it wouldn’t matter because I didn’t come here to find a man. There will be plenty of time for all of that after I sell my jewelry line.*

I can find a nice guy back in Rhode Island. Someone who will love me the way my father loves my mother. Unconditionally. And through the good as well as the bad times.

Anything less than that is a waste of my time.

You keep telling yourself that, Julia.

You might even begin to believe it.

* * *

A week later, Gio sat at the desk in his office, drumming the fingers of one hand on Julia’s file. He’d asked her out and she’d refused. That should’ve been the end of it. Honestly, he should have been grateful she’d turned him down. Calling her had been a mistake. Actually sleeping with her would have been an even bigger one.

He’d tried to get her out of his head.

He’d called a well-known Broadway actress who had slipped him her number a few months ago while he’d been on a date with someone else. At the time he’d thought she was stunningly beautiful. However, only two minutes in the phone call, he’d realized he no longer had any interest in her.

A week of ignoring the problem hadn’t made it go away.

There was only one woman he wanted.

One woman who was killing his ability to enjoy all others.

Julia.

“Rena, please have Julia Bennett come to my office as soon as she arrives tonight.”

“Regarding a security concern, Gio? Gerry may still be in his office. Would you like me to call down and check?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. Just send up Miss Bennett.”

Rena was quiet for a moment, a telltale sign that she wanted to ask him about it. Finally, she replied, “Okay.”

Anticipation built within Gio as he waited for Julia. He had to see her again. He had to know if he’d completely misread the signals from her.

What if she is as uninterested as she claims to be?

Did I only see what I wanted to see?

No, I didn’t imagine anything. She may have reasons why she thinks she doesn’t want to be with me, but it’s not because she isn’t attracted. I saw the way she looked at me.

There was a light knock on the door. “Gio, Miss Bennett is here to see you.”

“Send her in,” Gio said, hoping he didn’t sound as excited as he felt about the prospect.

Dressed in her tan security uniform, Julia stepped into his office.

Rena hovered near the door.

“That’ll be all, Rena,” Gio said.

With obvious reluctance, Rena closed the door.

“You wanted to see me, Mr. Andrade?” Julia asked, sounding more than a little apprehensive about it.

“Come here, Julia.”

Her eyes widened and she didn’t move.

He walked toward her. He stopped just a few inches from her. Close enough that he could feel her breath become more erratic. “I told myself to leave you alone, but I can’t stop thinking about you.” He ran the back of his hand down one of her cheeks and heard her catch her breath.

* * *

Julia jumped as the door behind them crashed open and a tiny, visibly pregnant woman entered with Rena at her heels.

Visibly agitated, Rena said, “I’m so sorry, Gio, I told her you were in a meeting. She wouldn’t wait.”

The little brunette braced herself with one hand on her lower back. “I wouldn’t be here if you were answering any of my calls.”

Oh, my God. Tell me this isn’t what I think it is.

“I’ll handle this, Rena,” Gio said and turned away from Julia to address the woman whom Julia prayed was not carrying his child.

Although, really, maybe it’s for the best.

I was beginning to waver there.

So, thank you, nameless pregnant lady.

“I should go,” Julia said and edged toward the door.

Gio pinned her with his hot gaze. *Oh, no, you cannot give me that look while fending off someone you knocked up. I’m outta here.*

“This will only take a moment,” Gio said and turned his attention back to the other woman. They stood in front of the now-closed door, effectively blocking Julia’s exit. “You shouldn’t have come here, Madison.”

“I had to.”

Awkward.

“I’ve tried to be kind about it, but now I’ll be blunt. Stop calling me. I’m not interested.”

Oh, my God. I guess I knew that someone who dated so many people would be jaded, but he's a complete asshole.

"If you don't come, your brothers might back out, also."

What?

Okay, now I'm officially lost. This fight needs CliffsNotes.

"I won't take no for an answer, Gio. This is too important."

"It's a wedding. They'll survive my absence."

"Stephan wants the whole family there."

"I've seen Stephan once in the last five years. I don't really care what he wants."

"Then do it for me."

Oh, pumpkin, he is so close to telling you that he doesn't care about you either. Why would you do that to yourself? The petite woman shook her head sadly. "Whatever anger you're holding on to, let it go for one day." She rested a hand on her stomach and said, "The next generation will look to us for guidance about what it means to be a family. We are family, Gio, even if you don't want us to be."

The more Julia looked at both of them, the more similarities she saw in their features. If this woman wasn't carrying Gio's child, who was she to him?

There was such pain in Gio's eyes, it threw Julia into an emotional tailspin. It was hard enough to stay away from him when she thought of him as nothing more than an insanely attractive man with the hots for her. If he kept looking at the woman next to him like she was ripping his heart out, she was a goner for sure. She held her breath and waited for Gio's answer.

"Your father understands why I won't attend. So does your uncle," Gio said coldly, his tone not reflecting the hurt in his eyes.

The little brunette's eyes misted over and Julia felt hers do the same. She had no idea what was keeping their families

apart, but she would have given anything to help them through something that was obviously tearing at both of them.

“No, they don’t. They love you. You have no idea how happy they were to see you at Alethea’s engagement party.”

“I’ve given you the only answer you’ll get from me. Now, please. Go.”

Wiping away a stray tear, Madison put her hand on the door to open it. “I don’t know why you’re so angry, Gio.”

“Then you’re the lucky one in this,” Gio said in an icy tone.

Looking somewhat deflated, Madison opened the door and left.

Whatever attraction Julia had felt for Gio was overshadowed by the emotion of the moment. She thought of her own family and how desperately she missed them, and burst out, “You can’t let her go like that.”

Face tight with anger, Gio didn’t look away from the door. “It’s none of your concern.”

“She’s pregnant.”

Turning some of the anger on Julia, Gio growled, “A condition that had no relevance in my decision.”

Julia threw up both of her hands in the air. “No relevance? You just threw a crying, pregnant woman out of your office.”

“Enough. I didn’t bring you here for this.”

As loving as her family was, they called a spade a spade without remorse or hesitation. She’d been raised to appreciate the value of an honest opinion, and New York wasn’t going to change that. The air that had been heavy with anticipation and attraction now crackled with more volatile emotions. “You know what your problem is?”

His eyes narrowed and he waited.

“I bet people don’t tell you when you’re behaving badly.” Julia shook her head. “That was wrong. You should call her and apologize. I don’t know what went on with your family,

but I can't believe it was her fault. You shouldn't take it out on her."

For a moment Gio said nothing. "Is that it?"

No. Julia thought of how much she missed being able to talk to her mother, and that feeling gave her the courage to voice her thoughts. "If you're lucky enough to have family that loves you enough to chase you and beg you to come to their wedding, you should go. She was right. Whatever you're holding onto, you could put it aside for one day."

"That's a lot of advice from someone who knows nothing about the situation." His eyes were lit with a fire she couldn't decipher.

She held his eyes and defended herself. "I know that at the end of the day, family is all that matters. You're right, though. I don't know your situation and I don't know you. Maybe you and I don't share the same definition of family."

Without looking away, he took out his cell phone. He punched in a number, then waited, neither of them moving while it rang. "Madison. I've changed my mind. I will be attending the wedding. No, I'm sure my brothers will have the information. Yes, put me down for two." After listening to response on the other end of the line, Gio ended the call and replaced his phone in his breast pocket.

A sense of triumph filled Julia, followed by a pang of jealousy as she wondered who he'd be taking to the event.

"The wedding is in two weeks. We'll fly out the day before it."

"Me?" Julia swayed. "Where is the wedding?"

"It's on an island off the coast of Italy. And, yes, you. You're the one who thought it was important that I attend."

Oh, no, no, no. "I—we can't do that."

"Because?"

Because Italy means flying somewhere together and I can barely keep my hands off you now. "Because I work for you?" she practically squeaked. "You have a no-dating policy."

“An easy enough problem to solve. You’re fired.”

“You can’t fire me. I need this job.”

“Then we have a problem, because I’m not going to the wedding without you.” He walked over until he once again stood so close that all she had to do was lean forward ever so slightly to be flush against him. Tip her head up just a fraction to make their lips would touch. “What would it take to get you to come with me?” His words hung between them, their dual meaning raising the heat in the room. He ran a light finger down the curve of her cheek and caressed the outline of her lips.

Julia shook her head free and backed up. Cornered, she blurted, “I’m not that kind of woman.”

A corner of his mouth curled in a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “What kind of woman are you?”

“The kind who is smart enough to know this is a bad idea. I want to say yes.” She took another step back. Being near him had her body humming with a need that scared her. As it often did when she was nervous, her mouth got ahead of her brain. “I mean, look at you. Who wouldn’t want to say yes?” She bumped into the table with the lamp from their first encounter, and those memories only agitated her more. “But if I sleep with you once, I’ll sleep with you twice. And then I’ll get attached to you. You’ll want to move on to the next woman and I’ll be all clingy. Trust me, it’ll get awkward.” She touched her lips and imagined his kiss. “I can’t do this.”

With that, she bolted out of the room.

Chapter Seven

Gio watched Julia spring away from him and surprised himself by smiling. He was done trying to talk himself out of wanting her. He felt more alive around her than he could ever remember feeling.

Let her run.

It'll only make having her that much sweeter.

And I will have her.

A bright red object near one of the chairs caught his attention. She'd left her purse. He picked up her bag and headed out of his office, choosing his strategy as he walked. He deposited the bag on his secretary's desk and said, "Rena, Julia Bennett's address is in a folder on my desk. I want you to send her this and something nice ..."

"No." Rena sat back in her chair.

Even though their conversations sometimes crossed into personal territory, Rena never argued with him. She may not have always agreed with how he handled his personal life, or that he involved her in it, but she had never refused him before.

The world was absolutely off-kilter that day.

"I wasn't asking."

Rena folded her hands in her lap. "I am not getting involved in this one. You're making a mistake. She's not your type. I actually like her."

"Weren't you lecturing me earlier on finding someone nice?"

Shaking her head, Rena pushed the bag back across his desk at him. "That was before I saw your cousin storm out of your office in tears. You're not ready for a nice woman. I've spoken to Julia. She's as sweet and trusting as they come, and

someone may teach her a harsh lesson because of it—but I won't help that happen.”

Picking up her bag, Gio found himself in the rare position of defending his actions. “I was merely asking you to return this.”

“No,” Rena said with finality.

With heat rising up his neck, Gio said, “Then I'll return it myself.” Heading down to the lobby, he passed several of his employees before he realized the second looks they were giving him were due to the purse he clutched in his right hand. The realization didn't slow his long strides down to the security desk.

“Where is she?” he demanded of the two men behind the security desk.

“Who, sir?” the older of the two asked.

“Julia Bennett. Is she still here?”

The guard looked uncomfortable as he said, “She just left. I have someone coming in to cover her shift.”

Left? “Do you know where she went?”

“I saw her outside talking to a ...” He checked his log and continued, “Mrs. D'Argenson. They left together in a limo.”

Madison and Julia?

How could they know each other?

In his office, it certainly hadn't appeared that they were acquainted. He didn't like surprises. He strode back up to his office, still clutching Julia's purse in one hand. As he passed Rena's desk, she asked, “Couldn't find her?”

In response, Gio did something he had never done before: Fueled by all the frustration building inside him, he slammed the door of his office shut.

He cursed and threw Julia's purse in the corner of his office.

How many times have I told Nick to stay away from women in this building? This is the reason. It's a distraction. I have phone calls to make. Leads to follow up on.

He sat down at his desk again but, instead of reaching for any of the piles of papers that required his attention, he reopened Julia's file. He traced the edge of her headshot that was stapled to her application.

What did she say? If she sleeps with me once, she'd sleep with me twice.

He groaned.

I have a feeling twice will be just how we start our first night together.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat as his cock sprang to life in agreement.

Julia Bennett. I know what I want. What is it that you want?

* * *

Real life needs a rewind button.

If given a redo, I would not go upstairs to close the door for Paul.

I would not repeatedly make an ass out of myself in front of Gio Andrade.

I would definitely not tell him that I was tempted to sleep with him.

As Julia hastily exited Cogent Solutions, she noticed a black stretch limo parked in front of it, with the pregnant woman, Madison, standing beside it. *Maybe she won't see me.*

Madison stepped away from the vehicle and walked quickly toward Julia. "Excuse me. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Julia looked around, then answered, "Sure, I guess."

"Are you leaving?"

As fast as I can. Julia nodded.

"Would you like a ride?"

Julia hesitated. The desire to get as far away as possible was strong. “I was going to take the bus.”

Madison stepped forward and took Julia lightly by the arm. “Please. I’ll drop you anywhere, and we can talk on the way.”

Curiosity warred with common sense. *Admit it, you’re hoping she tells you more about your hot boss.*

The driver held the back door of the limo open and Julia slid inside it. *So, what if I am? It doesn’t mean I’ll do anything about it. Anyone would be curious after the scene I witnessed upstairs.*

Madison sat down next to her and the driver closed the door. A moment later, they pulled into traffic. Madison turned in her seat and held out her hand to Julia. “I should have introduced myself upstairs. I’m Maddy D’Argenson. Gio’s cousin.”

Julia took her hand. “I’m Julia Bennett. Night security.”

Maddy smiled at the title and shook her hand warmly. “I wanted to thank you for whatever you said to Gio about going to the wedding.”

“His decision had nothing to do with me.”

“Really? Have you known him long?”

“I don’t actually know him at all. I work for him.” Julia referenced her outfit. The limo took a left turn and Julia said, “Shouldn’t I tell the driver where I live?”

“I was hoping you’d come somewhere with me first. There is someone I’d like you to meet.”

Julia looked out the window to assess where they were. *The Lincoln Center? Where are we going?* “This was a mistake. Do you mind pulling over?”

A line of disappointment creased the rich woman’s forehead. “Please. I just want to talk.”

“About what?” Julia asked slowly.

“Please?” Maddy leaned forward and asked, her heart in her eyes. “This is more important to me than I could ever

attempt to explain. Just give me a few minutes then I'll drop you off wherever you'd like. I promise."

Julia was pretty sure she'd used a similar tone with her own family when she really wanted something. It was impossible to look into Maddy's sweetly expectant face and disappoint her. Julia looked down at her attire. "I'm not dressed for anywhere nice."

With a triumphant smile, Maddy said, "Don't worry. We're going to a friend's place."

The limo pulled up to the front of an exclusive high-rise apartment building. A doorman rushed out to greet them. The driver helped Madison out of the car, but Julia hesitated. It felt safe to go with her. *After all, how dangerous could a pregnant woman be?*

Maddy smiled at the doorman and greeted him by name, then asked, "Is Miss Corisi home?"

He returned her smile and said, "Yes. She'll be happy to see you."

Maddy led the way to an elevator and Julia followed her into it. Maddy inserted a key that freed the elevator to go all the way to the top floor.

Penthouse. Of course. Why would anyone live on any other floor?

A butler answered the door almost immediately upon their arrival. He led them into a marble foyer that was lined with mountains of gifts on either side. A tall, thin, dark-haired woman in a simple yellow sundress rushed in and hugged Maddy. She ushered them inside and waved an arm toward the gifts. "Excuse the mess. They're coming in faster than I know what to do with them. I can't believe it's two weeks away. Nothing is ready."

Maddy hugged her again. "Everything will be perfect. I know it." Remembering Julia, she reached back and pulled her forward. "I brought someone I want you to meet."

Julia awkwardly offered the woman her hand. "Hello." And then looked back at Maddy for guidance after she shook the

woman's delicate hand.

Maddy laughed. "I'm sorry. I'm doing this badly. Julia, this is Nicole. Nicole Corisi." When Julia didn't react to the name, Maddy added, "Nicole is marrying my cousin, Stephan."

Julia smiled weakly. "Congratulations?"

Why am I here again?

Maddy was hopping beside her with excitement. "Nicole, Julia convinced Gio to come to your wedding."

Nicole cocked her head to the side and looked Julia over from head to toe. "Is she one of yours?"

Maddy shook her head. "No, but trust me. She's the one. You should have seen them together."

"It won't count," Nicole said with a smile.

"It doesn't matter," Maddy countered. "She's perfect for him."

The obscurity of the conversation was beginning to make Julia nervous. "Okay, it was nice meeting the two of you." She started backing toward the door they had entered through. "Thank you for the ride. I just remembered that I have somewhere I need to be."

"You can't leave," Maddy said quickly.

Nicole placed her hand on Maddy's arm to caution her. "We're scaring her. Julia, if this is your first experience with Maddy, let me just assure you that she is as harmless as she is crazy. The first ride I took in her limo ended with me delivering her baby. This can't be worse than that."

"I'm not scared," Julia lied. "You ladies seem wonderful, but I can't stay." She bumped into the butler as she backed up and almost fell, but he caught her and set her back on her feet. "I have to—"

"Aren't you curious why I brought you here?" Maddy asked.

Shaking her head, Julia stepped around the butler. "I'm really not a curious person in general. Really, most of the

world is a mystery to me and I'm fine with that."

"She's funny," Nicole said with a growing smile. "I like her."

"I know, right?" Maddy said in agreement. She beat Julia to the door, blocking her exit. "Just hear us out."

With her escape effectively blocked by a pregnant woman, Julia braced herself. *Money makes people weird. Just smile. Agree. Eventually she'll step away from the door ... then bolt.* "Okay."

"Would you like to come in and sit?"

Julia shrugged with what she hoped looked like confidence. "I'm fine here in the hall."

Her sweet smile returning, Maddy said, "Family is everything to me."

Okay, so crazy lady and I can agree on one point. Julia merely nodded.

"We almost lost Stephan this past summer, and it made us realize how short and fragile life can be. Stephan and I reached out to Gio and his brothers with the idea of mending ties with them. I didn't know until I met Gio that he was so angry with us. He said he wants nothing to do with us."

Nicole added drolly, "Some people would have taken that as a sign to leave him alone, but Maddy can't stand anyone being upset with her."

"It's not that, Nicole. He doesn't hate us. He's hurting." She looked across at Julia and said, "Sometimes the right woman can crack a man's heart wide open and bring him back from a dark place."

Julia leaned back against the wall in surprise. "You think I'm that woman? I barely know him. You misunderstood what you saw." The disappointment in Maddy's eyes was so genuine that Julia felt for her, despite the odd situation. "Instead of trying to set him up with someone, maybe you should kidnap *him*."

“Did I totally misread what I saw?” Tears came to Maddy’s eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m so emotional lately.” She laughed. “No wonder you think I’m crazy. Looking at the last hour through your eyes I can see why you’d be eager to get away from us. I just got so excited by the possibility. I can’t help thinking that if he falls in love with someone nice he’ll find his way back to us. When I saw the way he was looking down at you when I walked in, I thought ... I don’t know what I was thinking. Are you sure there is nothing between you?”

Against all common sense, Julia admitted, “He did ask me to go to the wedding.”

Nicole exclaimed, “He did?”

Maddy’s whole expression changed instantly and her smile returned. “I knew it. I knew he was into you.”

“I turned him down.”

Maddy clapped her hands together. “You are perfect.” She turned to Nicole, beaming. “Come on, admit it. She is.”

Nicole looked Julia over again and said, “It’s a long shot. Even if they fall in love it doesn’t mean you’ll reach him. Not every story has a happy ending, Maddy. What if this doesn’t work out and you end up making things worse?”

Maddy threw up her hands in the air and walked over to Nicole. “When are you going to trust me? I never fail.”

Seizing the opportunity Maddy presented by moving away from the door, Julia threw it open and bolted down the stairs. She didn’t stop until she was out the front entrance and a block away.

She hunched over, hands on her thighs, and tried to catch her breath.

New York, you are one strange city.

You’re not scaring me off, but let’s be honest: You could use a little therapy.

She stepped out into the street to hail a cab, then realized she didn’t have her purse with her and swore.

Great.

Just great.

My money is in my purse. My cell phone. My keys.

And I left it ... yep, in Gio Andrade's office.

Only ... she checked the street signs ... fifteen blocks away.

Just perfect.

Chapter Eight

His breath caught in his throat when he heard someone enter the outer office. He stood, then sat, then stood again and crossed the room decisively. Their eyes met and held with a heat he no longer tried to deny. “You left your purse,” he said in a harsher tone than he’d intended.

She looked flustered, windblown, and utterly irresistible. “I realized that about fifteen blocks from here.”

He took a step toward her, then stopped. The desire to continue toward her and pull her into his arms was strong, but he didn’t want her to bolt again. “You could have called me. I would have sent a driver to pick you up.”

She gave him a small, pained smile. “It’s okay, it gave me time to think. Plus, I don’t know your number. I don’t know you at all.”

He moved closer but stopped when she stepped back. “I intend to change that.”

She shook her head. “No.” She looked around the room until she saw her purse, then crossed the room to pick it up. When she met his eyes again, a new emotion darkened her expression.

He walked over and stood near her, so close their breath mingled and he could feel the heat rising from her skin. “Because if you sleep with me once, you’ll sleep with me twice?”

Her cheeks turned a delicious shade of pink. “I can’t believe I said that. Sometimes I speak before I think.”

“I appreciated your directness.” He reached out and tucked a loose tendril behind her ear. “What do you want, Julia? What did you come to New York for? I can get it for you.”

She pulled her head away from his touch. “I don’t want anything from you.”

“Everyone wants something.” *I want to fuck you, Julia. Again and again until I get you out of my head.* He pulled her to him and closed his mouth over hers. She met his mouth hungrily. He claimed her tongue with his own and reveled in her responsiveness. Where he led, she eagerly followed. Picking her up, he carried her over to his desk, pushing everything impatiently aside before sitting her on it so he could free his hands for more important things.

He told himself to go slowly, but the desire that burned in her blue eyes was his undoing. He needed to see her. To taste her. Without taking his eyes from hers, he tore the front of her shirt open, sending buttons flying. Her mouth dropped open in an audible sigh and he was lost.

He pushed her knees farther apart and stepped between them. He leaned forward, ran his hand up her back beneath her now-open shirt, and arched her toward him. Her nipples were hard little nubs beneath her satin bra. Nubs he couldn't resist. He took one hungrily into his mouth, even through the material. Warming it with his tongue. Teasing it with his teeth.

She moaned and pressed herself upward and deeper into his mouth, and that was all the encouragement he needed. He ran a hand along the back of her bra and smiled against her skin when he found no clasp.

Whoever created front-release bras was a genius.

Gio eagerly unclasped the front of the bra and paused to appreciate the perfection that was Julia. She raised her head, her eyes glazed with passion, and he understood her need. His hand rubbed and lightly pinched one of her nipples while his mouth adored and feasted upon the other. Then he moved his mouth and paid her other breast equal attention.

She clung to his shoulders, then buried one hand in his hair. He ground his hard cock against her through their clothes. Desire surged within him. He couldn't get enough of her. Every taste of her pushed whatever control he had further and further away. He impatiently reached for the fastening of her pants.

“Knock, knock,” a jovial male voice said from the doorway. “Well, will wonders never cease? I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.”

Raising his head reluctantly from Julia’s neck, Gio turned, shielding her from his brother Luke’s view. “What are you doing here?”

Smiling unabashedly, Luke leaned against the doorjamb. “Rena called me and said you were having a rough day, and I was ending a shift at the hospital anyway. She thought you might want to talk. It appears she was wrong.”

“Get the hell out of here.”

Still smiling, Luke wiggled his eyebrows and asked, “You’re not going to introduce me?” Normally Luke was the most reasonable of his brothers, but presently his curiosity was outweighing his survival instincts.

“No,” Gio said with finality.

“I heard you’re coming to the wedding and bringing someone with you. Is this her?” His smile widened and his eyes twinkled with humor.

Gio aggressively rose to his full height. “You won’t live to find out if you don’t leave now,” he said. Luke put up both hands in playful resignation and left, still smiling as he turned away.

Releasing a calming breath, Gio turned around and instantly felt like an ass. Julia was clutching her now buttonless top closed and sliding off his desk. The mood was broken. “Sorry about that,” he said gruffly.

Her half smile set his heart thudding in his chest again. “It’s okay.”

“I should have locked the door. I don’t normally ...”

With an adorable blush, Julia said, “I don’t do this either.” She picked up her purse and started edging away from him. “I’m going home now.”

“No,” he said much more forcibly than he meant to.

She tucked her shirt into her pants, overlapping the front in a way that covered her. “Yes.” She waved a shaking hand in the direction of his desk. “I’m not this person. I don’t know what to do with how you make me feel. But I do know that I need time to think about this.”

He reached for her, but she made it to the door before he could grab her.

When she opened her mouth to say something, he picked up his cell phone and said, “Todd, have a car brought around.”

“I don’t—” she started to say, but he cut her off.

“I’m taking you home.”

As they walked down the hallway together, she sighed and said, “I’m not judging, but your whole family is a little pushy. You might want to try asking instead of issuing orders.”

Her comment brought a smile back to his face. He placed his hand on her lower back and felt her tense when he replied, “Why ask when the outcome isn’t in question?”

“Are you always this much of an arrogant ass?” she asked crossly.

With an ironic smile, he said, “No, normally, I’m much, much worse.”

* * *

Julia didn’t know if he was joking or not, but she chuckled. “Don’t make me laugh. It makes it harder to say no.” She looked up at him and frowned. “And it is no. Just to be clear.”

They rode down in the elevator and walked out of the building together in silence. The chauffeur opened the door to a Bentley town car and she and Gio slid in. She told the driver her address and he pulled into traffic.

She snuck a peek at Gio. When he thought she wasn’t looking there was an expression in his eyes that seemed almost sad. Was that the pain Maddy had mentioned? What had this man been through that kept him away from family who obviously loved him? She shouldn’t ask. Shouldn’t get involved. It would be easier to walk away if she didn’t know.

And walk away is what she intended to do.

He wasn't looking for love; he was looking for a way into her pants. The problem was, every time she was near him she forgot why that was a bad idea. It didn't matter that they were both fully dressed and separated by a few inches. Her body tightened and warmed for his touch. If he took her into his arms right then, she doubted anything would stop them from finishing what they had started earlier. Not the fact that they were in public or that the driver would see them.

Why does this feel different than anything I've ever done?

I've dated a couple of men.

Men who made me laugh.

And sex with them was nice. It was a sweet expression of our feelings for each other.

But nothing like this. This is dangerous. I could lose myself if I'm not careful. She peered at him out of the corner of one eye and studied his strong profile. *But what a way to go.*

"I didn't realize you knew my cousin," he said, still looking straight ahead.

"I didn't, but she thinks I'm the reason you said yes to the wedding."

"You are," he said simply, and she swung around to search his face.

Julia swallowed hard. "I haven't changed my mind about not going."

He didn't answer. As they pulled up to her apartment building, he demanded, "You live here?"

Offended, Julia sat straight up. "It's clean. Relatively safe. And only one block from the subway."

He nodded toward what looked like a drug deal going down on the corner of the street.

She shrugged. "They're just kids. They've never bothered me."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “You can’t stay here.”

She put her hands on her hips and turned in her seat. “Where I live is none of your business. This is what I can afford, and I don’t appreciate you trying to make me feel badly about it.”

“You’re not staying here.”

“Yes, I am.”

He glared at her.

She glared back.

With a shake of his head, he said, “Gather your stuff. I’m checking you into a hotel.”

The words sent unwanted shivers of pleasure down her back. *No. No. No. Down, libido.* She put her hand on the door handle. “Thank you for the ride home.” She quickly opened the door and stepped out before he could stop her.

He was beside her in a heartbeat, blocking her escape. “Get back in the car.”

“No.”

He grabbed her arm. One of the youths across the street called out, “Hey, is he bothering you?”

She called back. “No, he’s going.” She met Gio’s eyes angrily and said, “You are—going. Just because I work for you doesn’t mean you have any right to tell me what I can do or where I can live. Let go of my arm.”

Gio dropped her arm. “I don’t understand you.”

I don’t understand me either, so we’re even. “Goodnight, Mr. Andrade.”

Julia turned and walked away, leaving him on the street watching her. Once she got inside, she didn’t go to the window of her apartment. She didn’t want to know if he was still there.

She wasn’t sure she’d be able to stop herself from running back down and throwing herself in his arms.

This is for the best.

Whatever animal attraction we have for each other is the kind of chemistry that always leads to trouble.

Remember why you came to New York.

Stay focused.

She changed into her nightgown and made herself a microwave dinner.

Who wanted a date with a hot billionaire anyway?

Chapter Nine

Rena knocked on Gio's door, then walked into his office without waiting for his answer. "Do you have a minute?"

In the middle of a phone call, Gio raised one hand, told the governor courting him to invest in his state to send him some stats, and hung up the phone. He stood and stretched. Unable to sleep the night before, he'd come back to his office and worked through the night—something he was able to do since so many of his contacts were international. Although he was tired, it was a good tired. Work had always done that for him. When nothing else made sense, business did. He looked down at his watch. "Eight o'clock already? Get Atwater on the phone. I read over his proposal. It's promising, but some of his assumptions about our role in developing the area are way off. I'll give him access to our lobbyists, but I don't want our name linked publicly with his project. It's not going to be a popular one."

Rena closed the door behind her. "Before I do that ... I want to apologize for last night. Luke called me after seeing you. I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"Forget it," he said gruffly.

Rena walked farther into his office. "We've known each other a long time, Gio. I feel like I grew up with you as a second brother. I know you hate when I get personal at work, but I'm worried about you. Did you actually reallocate one of your security team to watch Julia's apartment building?" She laid a hand flat on his desk, real concern evident in her expression. "What are you doing, Gio? This isn't like you."

Turning away from the concern in her eyes, Gio walked to look out the expansive office window. "I had to do something. The neighborhood she lives in isn't safe."

"Did she ask you for help?"

"Hell, no," Gio said, running his hand through his hair. "She told me the area was fine. I offered her an out, but she

wanted to stay there. I don't understand her."

"That's because she's not like the women you usually date."

He rubbed his forehead in frustration. "Tell me about it."

"Did you really ask her to go to the island wedding with you?" Rena said with a smile in her voice.

"How do you—" He shook his head in resignation. "Don't tell me. I'd rather not know how you heard that. It doesn't matter. She said no."

"Which is fortunate for you, because you don't believe in workplace relationships."

"Exactly."

"Want my opinion?"

He groaned. "Not really, but I've never successfully convinced you to keep it to yourself."

"Go slow with this one. Take a walk with her. Share a coffee. Get to know her."

"What happened to, 'Stay the hell away from her? You're not ready for a nice woman?'"

"According to Luke, that horse has left the gate. Just be careful with her, Gio. You could really hurt her."

Looking out over the skyline, Gio listened to Rena's footsteps retreating across the office, then the door opening.

"And take a shower. You look like hell."

Gio closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head.

A walk?

It wasn't what he was craving to do with Julia, but nothing else had worked with her thus far. He was willing to try anything. The small taste he'd had of her had only heightened his desire for her. He couldn't look at his desk without imagining her there, half-dressed and ready for him. He could almost smell her soft perfume, hear the moan she made. He wanted to hear his name on her lips while she came for him.

He loosened his tie and threw it over the back of one of the chairs, then headed for the side door to his office. He did need a shower. A cold one.

* * *

Julia had spent the day debating if she should return to Cogent Solutions or not. After walking out on a night she was scheduled, there was a good chance she was no longer employed. She finally decided that no matter how awkward it was, she would keep going until someone told her not to. *Landlords don't care that you almost slept with your boss the night before. They want their rent.*

And I'm not ready to go home yet.

She walked up to where Paul and Tom were sitting and asked, "Do you guys know if I'm scheduled for tonight?"

"As far as I know," Tom said as he pulled out a schedule sheet. "Yep. You're on the list. What happened last night? Mr. Andrade came down here asking for you. He didn't look happy."

Memories flooded back. Julia shook her head wordlessly at Tom. She didn't like to lie, but there was no part of yesterday that she was willing to repeat. *Thank God I didn't actually sleep with him. I'm already a mess.*

She turned to walk away and gasped when she saw Gio standing beside her.

"Let's take a walk," he said curtly.

Is this where he tells me that he can't believe I didn't realize I don't work here anymore? Let him say it. I've done nothing wrong. Okay, I've done a few things wrong, but all of that was just as much his fault as it was mine. It takes two. "I don't mind if they hear."

At least then I know we'll stay on safe topics.

He looked over at Paul and Tom, who were practically hanging over the security desk to hear what they were saying. They instantly sat down and looked away. "We can't talk here. Come to my office."

She stepped back and shook her head. “I’m already late for my shift.”

One corner of his mouth twitched as if he’d almost smiled. “I’m sure it will be fine.”

Hitching her purse higher on her uniform-clad shoulder, Julia said, “I need this job. If you have a security-related concern, I’ll be happy to discuss it with you—although I believe you will find Paul or Tom more knowledgeable. If I’m fired, you can tell me right here.”

“You’re not fired, but we do have something we need to discuss.”

It would be so easy to give in. She fought to retain some control. “If it’s a personal topic, I have a break at seven.”

His jaw tightened. “Are you serious?”

She raised her chin. “Yes.”

“Then I’ll see you at seven.” He turned and walked away.

Julia let out a long, shaky sigh.

Seven o’clock.

What does he want to talk to me about?

And how am I going to be able to wait until then to find out?

Chapter Ten

At seven o'clock sharp, the phone on her desk rang. When she answered, Paul said from the other end of the line, "Mr. Andrade just exited the elevator. Do you want me to stall him?"

"No, Paul. It's good. I'll be right out."

With a quick look in a compact mirror, Julia hesitated. *If I freshen my lipstick now, it'll look like I did it for him. Like I'm expecting him to ask me out again.* She made a face in the mirror and chided herself.

It's more likely that he's looking for a way to dismiss me without this becoming a big deal. He's had time to think about it and he's as embarrassed as I am by what we did—or almost did.

She decided to apply a fresh coat of lipstick after all. *I'm going to need all the help I can get to survive hearing him list why sex with me is no longer a good idea.*

With one final fortifying breath, she opened the door and walked out into the foyer. *Mistakes are like ladder rungs to success. Embrace them. Learn from them.* She couldn't remember which article she'd found that quote in, but right then it didn't matter. She was embracing that quote along with her mistakes. Hugging the shit out of both them, really.

And forcing a brave smile to her face. "Mr. Andrade."

"Gio," he said smoothly and took her by the arm, guiding her out of the foyer and out the front door of the building. "Let's go outside," he said, his tone giving no hint to where this conversation was headed.

"Sure," Julia said slowly, keeping step beside him. Not that she had much of a choice. He wasn't letting go of her arm. *Oh, my God. Just tell me whatever it is you want to say.*

After about a block, his pace slowed and his hold on her relaxed. Without looking down at her, he said, "About last

night ...”

Trying to sound casual, she said, “I vote we forget it ever happened and move on.”

He stopped and she nearly crashed into him. Even with people jostling around them on the sidewalk, the world seemed to disappear and nothing mattered but him and how she felt when she looked into his eyes. “Easier said than done.”

Tell me about it. She bit her bottom lip and waited, her heart beating wildly in her chest.

“I’ve told you how I feel about office relationships.”

Slam. Of course. Disappointment rose like bile in her throat. “Yes.”

“The only solution is you quit. You’re a distraction I don’t need at work. I’ll help you find another job. Not right away, of course. I’d like you to be free to travel with me. You’ll have to move, though. Your living arrangements are completely unacceptable. I’ll set you up in an apartment on the nice side of town. If you’re worried about money, I can give you a generous allowance.”

A slow burning anger started deep in Julia’s stomach. Between gritted teeth she said, “Sounds like you put a lot of thought into this offer.”

“I did,” he said, so calmly that she wanted to kick him.

“And never once did it sound offensive to you? I can’t believe I was upset because I thought you were going to say you didn’t want to see me again.” She threw her hair back over her shoulder. “You make me so angry I could strangle you.” She poked a finger into his suit-covered shoulder. “And not in some funky, paid-mistress way. I mean actually hurt you.”

He pulled her to him and the kiss they shared channeled her anger into a frenzied passion. Her hands flew to the back of his head and she ground against him, unable to deny the pull between them. His hands cupped her from behind, grinding her against his pulsing erection.

“Get a room,” someone said behind them, but the taunt wasn’t enough to pierce through their haze of sexual need. They stumbled backward against the side of a building, and Julia finally understood why people risked everything for this. There was something exquisitely, almost painfully, beautiful about giving in to a primal need and leaving the rest of the world behind.

His hand was sliding up her rib cage beneath her shirt when a camera flashed and someone said, “Got it.”

He pulled back. “Shit.” He reached for the photographer, but the young man was too fast and disappeared into the busy stream of people. His face tight with anger, and his eyes still storming with unfulfilled passion, he said, “This is exactly why we can’t continue as we are ...”

Julia’s head was still spinning from the kiss. “I did not mean for that to happen.” She covered her lips with one shaking hand.

“I did.” He looked down at her intently and then, with his hand on the small of her back, guided her toward his office building. “Maybe now you’ll stop pretending we don’t want the same thing.”

She looked up at him sadly. “I don’t know what kind of women you’re used to dating, but I don’t want your money. I don’t need you to pay for an apartment for me. And I’m offended that you think I would.”

“Then tell me what you do want.”

Julia looked away and then back at him. She had difficulty forming coherent thoughts when he was around her, but if he cared enough to ask, then she felt he should get an honest answer. “All the normal stuff. Ask me out. Send me roses. I’m partial to pink ones.”

He didn’t look happy with her answer, nor did he flat out reject the idea. They reentered Cogent Solutions together. He walked her to the door of her station, not seeming to care that all eyes were on them as he did. “I don’t know what we’re doing, but God help me, I can’t stop myself when it comes to

you.” After one final, deep kiss that left Julia sagging against the wall, he walked away.

Julia was still standing there, watching him go, when she heard Paul say, “See. When a woman is that beautiful, no man is immune.”

“Shut up, Paul,” Tom said.

Still floating from the kiss, Julia wasn’t bothered by the commentary. She returned to her station, sat down, and hoped no one decided to break into the building that night because her attention was definitely not on the monitors.

* * *

Back in his office, Gio sat down at his desk and picked up his phone. Years of erasing stories in the media had given him the contacts necessary to ensure that photo wouldn’t see print. It wasn’t an easy feat in this day of the Internet, but people rarely published anything unless there was potential profit in it. The trick to getting a story killed was to make sure that remaining silent was more profitable for the source; or safer for their career.

He preferred to keep things positive, but he’d go to whatever lengths he needed when it came to protecting what was his.

And Julia fit that definition, regardless of how she might try to fight it.

She would be his.

Even though she fought him at every turn. He closed his eyes as he remembered how he hadn’t cared who was around them on the street. He’d wanted her with such urgency that the photographer had done them a favor. A few more minutes and they might have started shedding clothing and given the press a story that even his contacts couldn’t squash.

He groaned. After years of judging Nick for chasing everything in a skirt and mocking his lack of control, Gio was coming to the humbling conclusion that he had his own Achilles’ heel—and her name was Julia.

And what did she want from him?

Flowers. He did a quick search on his phone for a flower shop, then placed an order that the florist repeated twice to make sure she'd heard correctly.

Would he like to include a message?

Oh, yes.

Chapter Eleven

The long-stemmed pink roses started arriving the next morning in an abundance that revealed Gio had no idea how small her apartment was. Once she'd packed them into her tiny kitchenette, the window sill, all of the floor space around her bed, and even put a few in the bathroom, she'd asked the delivery man to hand the rest of the vases out on the street below.

Yes, at night the neighborhood showed its underbelly, but during the day its sidewalks were filled with regular people who were thrilled by this unexpected gift: mothers walking their young children, couples who felt the flowers were a sign from fate, and some street vendors she'd never seen smile until the florist pointed up toward her open window and offered them a bouquet. After their initial suspicion passed, many of them had held up the flowers and waved to her in thanks.

The entire experience had put a lasting smile on Julia's face. She hadn't opened the envelope that had accompanied the flowers. She knew who they were from and she wanted to savor the moment. When the last bouquet was given away, she closed her window, waded through a forest of roses, and sat cross-legged in the middle of her bed.

She held the envelope to her chest but still didn't open it. He's doing what I asked him to, but what do I have in common with a man like Gio? It would never work out. He wants sex. Hot. Glorious. Repeated sex. And he's willing to do anything to get me to agree.

That's not love.

That's late-night porn.

Something he's already offered to pay me for. That's what being his mistress would be. A socially acceptable payment for sex.

Even these flowers. One thousand long-stemmed fuck-me-please flowers.

I didn't think he'd actually send them.

Or that I'd love the gesture as much as I do.

She picked one of the flowers out of a vase on the floor beside her bed and raised it to her nose, closing her eyes in pleasure as the scent filled her senses. The soft petals brushed against her bottom lip, reminding her how his mouth had fit so perfectly over hers. Her body didn't care about the poor timing of this temptation; it flooded with heat at the memory of being pushed up against the side of a New York building with a passion that had robbed both of them of their inhibitions.

She opened her eyes and studied the envelope again.

Does it include an invitation to somewhere?

It doesn't matter.

The flowers don't actually change anything.

I'd be better off spending the day in the Diamond District trying to make a connection than being pulled, albeit willingly, into something I know is wrong for me.

Call him at work.

Thank him and politely refuse to take this further.

Don't read the card.

Once you open that door, you won't be able to close it.

You won't be strong enough to say no.

She lay back on the bed and covered her eyes with the paper.

Her phone began to vibrate on the nightstand beside her bed. She rolled onto her stomach. Unknown number. She held her breath and answered it. "Hello?"

"Good morning, Julia," Gio said, his voice warm and intimate.

She sat straight up in her bed and dropped the card. "Mr. Andrade."

"We're way beyond using last names and you know that."

Protectively pulling down her nightgown to cover her knees, Julia said huskily, “About that. Thank you for the flowers, but—”

“Did I wake you?”

“No, the delivery did that,” she said, then felt bad that she sounded ungrateful. This wasn’t going as she’d planned.

“So, you’re not on your bed? I have an image in my head of you there, surrounded by those roses.”

The heat from a blush spread up Julia’s chest and warmed her cheeks. She knew she shouldn’t, but she couldn’t help herself. She said, “I am on my bed.” Then she hastily added, “But only because it doubles as my couch.”

He groaned. “I refuse to sink low enough to ask you what you’re wearing, but if you want to describe it I won’t stop you.”

There was something irresistibly tempting about doing just that. Was it the knowledge that in that moment she had the same power over him that he had over her? The sense that he was fighting this as much as she was?

It proved too heady to resist. “I’m still in my nightgown.”

He let out a long breath. “If I were there it wouldn’t be on you for long. Take it off, Julia. For me.”

Her first response was to laugh and refuse, but his softly spoken order echoed through her and her body started humming with need for him. As she gave into it, it became impossible to deny him anything. She slid the nightgown over her head and lay back, fully naked on her bed. “It’s off,” she whispered.

The pained sound he made had her dripping wet and closing her eyes, imagining him there with her.

“Lick your thumb. Lick it, then circle one of your nipples. Imagine my tongue there. I wouldn’t be able to keep my mouth off you. What would you want me to do to them?”

What would have felt ridiculous with anyone else was somehow right with Gio. She did as he asked, gasped as the

cold air tightened and puckered her nipple with pleasure. She imagined that her hand was his mouth. Her fingers were his teeth. She pinched herself lightly and moaned. “I’d want you to use your teeth gently. Like you did in your office. Tugging. Teasing. Oh, God, this is crazy.”

“You’re killing me, but don’t stop, Julia. I’m here with you. Right here. What would you want me to do? What do you like?”

She ran her hand up her neck and pushed her hair aside. “I love the feel of your hot breath on my neck, the feel of your lips claiming where I’m vulnerable.”

“I’ll remember that. I’ll start there and kiss my way down, slowly. I’ll kiss the curve of your waist, the silk of your thighs. I’ll want to dive into you, but I’ll make you wait until you’re writhing and begging for me to taste you.”

That would not take long, Julia almost said aloud.

“Are you wet for me, Julia?”

“Yes,” she said, giving herself to him fully in the safety of the situation. Her hand sought her own juices and she began to rub herself. “Oh, God, I am so wet.”

“Do you have a vibrator?” he asked and her hand froze.

I can’t tell him.

She did have one, but it was her guilty secret. One that she hadn’t even shared with her ex-boyfriend, even after sleeping with him.

“You do, don’t you? Are you shy about it? Sex is a natural part of life, Julia. There is nothing shameful about knowing how to please yourself. In fact, I want you more now. I want to watch you make yourself come. I want to lie next to you, caressing you as you bring yourself to climax. But for now, let me hear it. Take yourself to where we both want to go.”

Frantically, Julia flung out a hand and opened the drawer on the nightstand beside her bed. Her hand closed on the six-inch toy she’d never admitted to owning. With a quick twist she turned it on and brought it to her eager clit.

“That’s it, Julia. Oh, God, you are so hot. Dip it inside of you. Deep inside. That will be me. Soon.”

She drove the toy deep inside her with one thrust and called out, “Gio.”

“Oh, yes. Say my name. I want to be on your lips. I want to be in your head. When you come, I want my name to be what you call out.”

With increasing speed, Julia plunged the vibrator inside of her and pulled it out, sliding it against her throbbing nub as she did. In and out. Faster and faster, until she dropped the phone next to her, grabbed the comforter next to her with one grasping hand, and cried out Gio’s name as she surrendered to her shuddering, glorious orgasm.

Neither of them spoke. As Julia came back down to earth, she grew self-conscious, as if he could see her. She pulled the comforter over her head quickly and stashed her vibrator back in the drawer.

She groaned. *What am I doing?*

“Julia.” He said her name like it was a command.

She’s not here.

She buried her face in a pillow for a moment. *No wonder he thinks he can offer me money for sex. What is wrong with me?*

“Pick up the phone or I’m coming over,” he said in a determined voice, and Julia knew he meant it.

With her face still buried in the pillow, she held her cell phone to her ear. “I am so embarrassed. I may never leave my apartment again.”

“You? I’m sitting at my desk with a hard-on the likes of which I haven’t seen since puberty. If I had known this was how I would start my day, I would have locked the door and joined you. I almost did, but lately someone would have walked in, and everyone is pretty sure I’ve lost my mind already. Because of you I’m going to be late for my meeting. I want to appear excited about the project, but not this excited.”

Julia chuckled reluctantly, but she wasn't coming out of hiding yet. "I spent the morning rehearsing how to tell you that I'm not interested in whatever you wrote on the card."

"You didn't open it?"

"No, I was trying to remain strong."

This time he chuckled, and she threw the pillow across the room as if he were there to get hit by it. "It's not funny. I don't do stuff like this. I'm really a pretty boring person once you get to know me. You need a woman who ... someone who ..."

"Stop talking, Julia, and open the card."

She sat up and did as he asked. Well, asked was putting it nicely. He was back to using the authoritative tone that made her want to defiantly stick her tongue out at him.

But not more than she wanted to know what he'd written. She tore the envelope open.

"Pick any dress you want and wear it for me tonight. We have a reservation at Le Loire at eight."

Without thinking, she said, "I'm working tonight."

"I already covered your shift."

"You did what? Without even asking me?"

"The outcome was never in question."

"It most certainly was ... I mean ... is."

"I'll pick you up at seven thirty."

"I haven't said yes."

"If you're not dressed for dinner I'll assume you want to spend the evening alone with me ... in your bed."

"What if I'm not here?" she asked, desperately trying to regain control of the situation.

"I'll find you. You can't run from this, Julia, any more than I can. Go to the address on the card and get yourself something nice. On me. Something you know I'll enjoy taking off you as much as you'll enjoy wearing." He hung up.

Julia held up the business card of a small, elite boutique on the Upper East Side.

I would tell myself that I'm not going dress shopping today, but I am really bad at saying no to this man.

* * *

Two hours later, Julia was craning her neck to see how the back of the sleeveless floor-length black gown she was modeling shimmered in the changing-room mirror. She would have gone out into the main area, but she didn't want to talk to the clerk. Talking about the dress meant she was actually doing this. She was letting a rich man buy her a dress, take her out, and then most likely take her home.

She wasn't ready to defend that choice yet.

But she had to admit, the dress fit her perfectly.

If she was the kind of girl who did something this spontaneous, this was definitely how she'd dress to do it.

The light caught the gemstones in her gold necklace and brought its floral design to life. It wasn't an overly expensive piece, but she'd used real metals to make it. She'd worn it to help her remember what was really important. Family. Duty. Finding a buyer and going home to save her father's company.

She spun in front of the mirror.

This was nothing more than a distraction from that.

But what a wonderfully magical distraction it was.

She and her parents had always lived a modest life. Even when business had been good, her parents hadn't been the type to care about material things. She'd grown up in a beach town, spending most of her free time in the summers on the beach in a bikini and shorts, or serving ice cream to tourists. During cooler weather, she'd holed up in her jewelry workshop, which her father had created for her at his furniture factory. It didn't matter to him that it didn't make sense to do it. He'd done it for her. Just like he'd added a jewelry section to his showroom floor. Not because it was good for business, but because he

thought she was talented and her work deserved to be displayed.

Oh, Dad.

Is this how you felt when you met Mom? Or am I making the biggest mistake of my life?

I know I should walk away from this situation, but I can't.

I want to see him again.

The clerk's voice rose and broke into her thoughts. "Mrs. Rockport. I didn't know you were coming in today. I'd close the boutique for you now, but I have a woman in the back trying on some dresses."

An older woman's voice answered curtly, "As long as she's not some simpering, preening fool I'm sure I'll be able to overlook her presence."

"Yes, Mrs. Rockport. Yvonne isn't here today. Are you looking for something off the rack?"

"If she were here I would already have a glass of champagne in my hand. Not that she carries the good stuff, but it's the courtesy that matters." After a brief pause, the older woman said, "What are you waiting for? Go get one."

Crotchety old bitch.

Julia admonished herself for the thought. *Money doesn't make people happy. She's probably miserable and lonely. Why else would she come to the shop alone when someone like her could have whatever she wanted delivered?*

Turning her attention back to the mirror, Julia held her hair up and studied it from the side. *No, I'll feel like I'm going to prom. Simple is better.* She sternly looked at herself in the mirror again. *Not that I'm going.* She let her hair drop, then brought her hands up to undo the zipper, but it was caught.

Oh, great.

She tried again without success.

Maybe I can get it over my head without unzipping it.

The material fit her too snugly.

In resignation she opened the dressing-room door and stepped out. Giving in to an inner impish impulse, she walked over to the older woman, who had maintained her health into what looked like her late seventies. She stopped in front of her, turned, and spoke over her shoulder to her. “Do you mind unzipping me?”

The woman’s mouth dropped open. “Excuse me?”

Kill them with kindness. That was her father’s motto—and honestly, sometimes it was fun to do. She pretended not to understand that the older woman found the request distasteful. “The zipper is stuck. Could you give it a little pull?”

“Do I look like I work here?” the woman asked in a tone a queen might use in the presence of one of her filthiest subjects.

Then a bit of her no-nonsense mother came out. Turning around to face the woman, Julia said bluntly, “No. I’ve found the people who work here to be quite pleasant.”

“Unbelievable. They will let anyone shop here now, won’t they? I’ve never, in all of my life, met anyone so without class.”

With a sweet smile, Julia said, “I have. I heard you talking to the clerk. You know what? I don’t care how much money you have, you shouldn’t treat people that way. She probably makes just over minimum wage plus commission, so she has to kiss your ass, but I don’t. You weren’t nice to her, but you should have been. I feel sorry for you if you can’t see that.”

A slow red spread up the woman’s face. She opened her mouth, then closed it with a snap.

The clerk returned and, with a shaking hand, handed a glass to the older woman, who accepted it and said, “Thank you.” A show of manners that seemed to surprise the clerk. Then she said, “You may want to help this young lady out of her dress. She’s trapped.”

The clerk said in a rush, “It’ll only take a moment.”

With an expression Julia couldn't decipher, the older woman said, "Take your time."

Julia returned to the dressing room, followed by the young clerk. Once inside, the woman made quick work of untangling the material that had wedged inside the zipper. Then she met Julia's eyes in the mirror and said, "I heard what you said to her. You have no idea how many times I've wanted to tell her off, but I need this job."

"My father always says that people treat others the way they feel on the inside. She can't be a happy woman."

From across the floor, Mrs. Rockport said, "Until just now I had no idea that the dressing rooms were not soundproof."

Julia and the clerk hunched over in a shared guilty laugh they fought to contain.

The clerk said, in a much softer tone than she'd used before, "She heard us. I am so fired."

If there was one thing working in her father's showroom had taught Julia, it was how to calm a disgruntled customer. "I'll fix this," she whispered.

Changing hastily back into her jeans and blouse, Julia squared her shoulders and went to face the woman, hoping to smooth some ruffled feathers. The clerk would likely spend the rest of the day hiding in the changing room if it didn't work. She walked directly over to the woman and said, "Don't be upset with the clerk. This was my fault. My mouth gets ahead of my brain sometimes. That was unforgivably rude of me. I apologize."

Settling somewhat, Mrs. Rockport said, "Everyone has an off day. I, myself, woke up in a foul mood."

Julia hid her grin but couldn't hold her tongue. "It didn't show at all."

The woman narrowed her eyes, then let out a bark of a laugh. "You have spunk, don't you? I was like you when I was younger. Outspoken long before it was fashionable to be so."

Julia's face split in a genuine smile. "I can see you as a firecracker."

"Oh, I was. My father feared I'd never settle down." She looked wistful as old memories brought a small smile to her face, but the moment was short-lived. "I did, of course. Everyone does." She sat down as if suddenly tired, then said, "So, tell me about the man you're buying that dress for."

"I'm not buying it," Julia said in a rush. "I could never afford something like that."

The woman looked her over shrewdly. "So, he's buying it for you?"

"Maybe," Julia said and plopped down on the seat next to the woman who a moment ago had been an adversary. "I shouldn't let him. Really, if I had any sense, I wouldn't even see him again." Without waiting for a response from the older woman, Julia said, "He's rich and used to getting what he wants. I come from a working-class family. I don't care which fork is the right one to use at dinner, and he was probably born knowing that sort of thing. All we really have in common is —" Julia stopped and blushed. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm sharing this with you."

Mrs. Rockport quietly studied her for a moment, then said, "I married my first husband against my father's wishes. He didn't come from money. In fact, when I met him he didn't even have a job. But he had dreams and a smile that could make a foolish decision seem like the only one that made sense."

Julia turned in her seat. "What happened?"

"We had one magical year, then the Korean War started and he signed up to go. His friends were going and, even though my father would have helped him dodge the draft, he wanted to serve his country." Her face twisted a bit. "He never came home."

Julia put her hand on the woman's and wiped a tear away with her other. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

Mrs. Rockport patted her hand and recomposed herself. “It was a long time ago. I married again. He was a good man who loved me very much. He died, too, a few years ago.” She took a deep breath. “You can make all the plans you want, but life has a way of turning out however the hell it wants to, no matter what you do. And in the end, all you have are memories.”

Uncharacteristically, Julia was speechless.

The older woman laced her fingers in thought. “Let your man buy you that dress. Give yourself something to smile about when you’re my age.”

Julia blushed and instinctively touched her necklace. Would everything work out the way it was supposed to, even if she let herself look away long enough to build those memories?

“That’s a beautiful piece you’re wearing,” Mrs. Rockport said.

Julia smiled. “I designed it. The gems aren’t real. When I have my own business one day it will have real stones, but for now that’s just a dream.”

“May I?”

Julia nodded and the woman touched it lightly.

“It looks like something my sister would have worn. She loved flowers and diamonds.”

Following an impulse, Julia took the necklace off and put it in the woman’s hand. “I’d like you to have it.”

Mrs. Rockport tried to hand it back. “I couldn’t possibly.”

Julia pressed it into her hand and said, “More than anything else, I am an artist. And for me there is no greater pleasure than knowing something I’ve created has touched someone’s heart. If it reminds you of your sister, you should have it. I can make another.”

Clearing her throat, the woman fingered the necklace gently, then nodded. “I would pay you, of course.”

Julia shook her head. “I wouldn’t take it.”

“You’re an awful businesswoman,” the woman chided gently.

“Maybe,” Julia said with a rueful smile.

They sat there quietly for a moment, then Mrs. Rockport asked, “So, are you getting the dress?”

Julia nodded shyly and blushed again.

“Claudia,” the older woman called out to the clerk. “I’m feeling spontaneous today. Please have one of each dress here wrapped and sent to a local charity. Tell Yvonne I want a list of where they went. But make sure you get credit for the sale. Put it on my account.”

After double-checking she’d heard right, the clerk rushed off to ring up the sale.

“What’s your name?” Mrs. Rockport asked.

“Julia. Julia Bennett.”

The woman stood and held out her hand. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Bennett. I hope our paths cross again.”

Julia couldn’t imagine how they would, but she shook the woman’s hand warmly and said she hoped the same.

Alone in the boutique again, she asked the clerk to box up the dress and held it tightly the entire taxi ride home.

Am I about to create memories I’ll treasure for a lifetime?

Or make a mistake that will haunt me?

And are women nearing eighty a reliable source for sexual advice?

Chapter Twelve

Gio watched Julia pour over the menu in a way none of the many women he'd brought here ever had. Food was not why people came to Le Loire, the theater district's highly exclusive restaurant. They came because reservations were booked more than a year out and merely getting a table meant that you had arrived in some way at the top of New York's social stratosphere. They came to see and be seen.

A quick look around the dining area revealed a collection of New York's wealthiest and visiting famous. Gio wasn't impressed by either, but he knew most women were.

Dressed as she was, Julia blended perfectly with the crowd. He'd caught more than one of his peers eyeing her appreciatively. She wasn't the first beautiful woman he'd escorted in public. Normally he didn't care one way or another what others thought of his date, but when he caught one blatant male admirer staring at Julia's profile from a few tables away, he'd half risen out of his chair without thinking.

To what? Brawl?

The man had met his eyes, read his intent, and hastily looked away. Gio had let out a long breath and settled back into his seat, surprised by how possessive he already felt about the woman sitting across from him.

"Have you had the seafood here?" she asked, drawing him back from his thoughts.

"I'm sorry?"

"The plateau de fruits de mer. I love seafood, but I had this dish once at an expensive restaurant in Rhode Island and it was served with a tiny octopus and whole prawns. Some had eyes. I can't eat anything that still has eyes."

"I normally have the Kobe steak," he said, somewhat bemused by her level of animation. He'd never seen a woman order anything but a salad—dressing on the side, all possible

calories or carbs banished from their meal. “Chef Cazon is excellent. I’m sure you’ll be pleased with whatever you order.”

“You can’t come to a place like this and have steak,” she said with a laugh. “How about this? I’ll order for you and you order for me.”

“Why?” he asked slowly.

She seemed as confused by his reluctance as he was by her suggestion. “Because it’ll be fun?”

His idea of fun had more to do with what they would do after dinner, but he decided to humor her. He opened his menu. “What do you like?”

She put down the menu. “I’m not going to tell you. You have to try to figure it out.”

“I don’t play games,” he said, more out of habit than from a real desire to end the exchange. He did want to know what she liked, and he intended to spend the rest of night exploring just that. He reached for a glass of water, seeking a calm that he’d more easily achieve by pouring the cool drink on his bulging crotch than by drinking it. *Slow down. No need to rush.*

She cocked her head to one side and said, “Maybe you should. Then you’d look less like you’re constipated all the time.”

He choked on the water, swallowed it the wrong way, and choked more.

She was up, out of her seat, and patting his back forcibly. “Are you okay?”

He stood, cleared his throat one final time, looked into her anxious eyes, and let out a laugh that echoed through the suddenly silent restaurant. He took one of her hands in his and said, “Sit down, Julia. I’m fine.”

She looked around, realized that all eyes were on them, and returned to her seat in a rush—a beautiful pink flush on her cheeks. She picked up the menu again, this time hiding behind it. “I shouldn’t have said that. Why don’t I think before I speak?”

Gio reached across the table and took one of her hands in his. “You are refreshingly honest.” The smile she gave him as a reward for his comment stole his breath away. Still, he couldn’t resist teasing her a bit. “Constipated, huh?”

She blushed again. “Not literally. Emotionally. Like there is so much you want to say but you won’t let yourself.”

He dropped her hand as the words cut too close to home.

The sommelier came by and asked if Gio would be ordering his usual, or if he would like to see a wine menu. Gio said, “The usual.” Then looked across at Julia. “Unless you have a preference.”

“I don’t drink.”

“Not even one glass?” he asked.

“No one in my family drinks much.” A warm smile spread across her face. “My father always said he’d rather get lost in Renoir than old grapes.”

“That’s an unusual viewpoint,” Gio said, gesturing to the sommelier that they had finished their order.

“My father’s a unique man, and perfect for my mother. They are the most amazing people in the most surprising ways. My father was a starving artist until he met my mother. He was everything her family didn’t want for her. He came from a tough background. He had no money to speak of. But he loved her. She told me she knew from the first moment they met that he was the one for her. Just like that. They met. Wham—it hit both of them, and they were never apart after that. She helped him make a business out of his love of art. That’s what people do when it’s right. They bring out the best in each other. I know how lucky I am to have such great parents. And that’s why I’m here.”

The more she spoke, the more uncomfortable Gio felt. In some ways Rena was right. Julia sounded dangerously naive and innocent. Modern women didn’t believe in love at first sight. They were practical—as jaded as he was. Rena was wrong, though, in thinking that getting to know Julia better would lessen how important their differences were.

He wanted to ask her what she'd meant by her parents being the reason she was here, but the waiter arrived and asked for their order. Instead of giving hers, Julia surprised both of them by asking, "Is it possible to speak with the chef?"

The waiter looked from her to Gio. Gio nodded and the waiter headed toward the kitchen.

"I'm sure the waiter would know which items do or do not have eyes," he said softly.

Julia smiled into his eyes but for once did not share her thoughts. The chef was at the table almost instantly.

"Mr. Andrade. It is a pleasure to have you join us again. What can I do for you?"

Gio sat back and gestured indulgently toward Julia. "Eli, it was Miss Bennett who had a question for you."

Julia enthusiastically put out her hand to the chef, who shook it politely.

"A pleasure, Miss Bennett."

"I heard a rumor that my dining partner tends to eat the same thing every time he comes here. I saw that you had a few items that were traditional dishes. Are those family recipes?"

A huge, pleased smile spread across his face. "Yes, they are. My mother visits a few times a year and insists that they remain on the menu."

"She must be so proud when she comes here. Which dish is her favorite?"

"She says the boeuf bourguignon reminds her of home. It's a simple beef stew in red wine with bacon, mushrooms, and onions."

"That sounds like the perfect comfort food. Does making it remind you of your childhood?"

"Yes," he said in surprise. "It would be my honor to make it for you."

Julia nodded and an impish smile stretched across her lips. "You seem to know Mr. Andrade. What would you pick for

him?”

“I would not presume to know his taste.”

“Humor her,” Gio ordered softly. For a reason he couldn’t pin down, it was important to him that Julia wasn’t disappointed in this game.

With a shrug, the chef said, “Before tonight I would have said that his palate had become dull from his predictable diet. However, it looks like he’s ready for a change, so I would suggest the sautéed langoustine with a summer truffle and chanterelle in a sweet sauce. I’ve added a few enhancing spices. It is mild and pleasing at first, but has a bite that is unforgettable.”

“A bite?” Julia asked, missing the undercurrent of the conversation. “That sounds either delicious or dangerous.”

Exactly what I was thinking myself. Gio nodded to the chef to approve the choice. Would a night of sex with Julia lessen the hunger within him or increase it?

He didn’t know, but he was driven to find out.

The chef turned to Julia, raised her hand, and kissed it. “It was a real pleasure meeting you, Miss Bennett. I hope to see you again.”

Julia blushed, and Gio was glad the chef retreated back to the kitchen before he made Gio say something that revealed how possessive he was becoming toward Julia.

* * *

Julia watched the chef disappear into the kitchen, then groaned when she glanced back at Gio and caught him frowning at her. *I can’t believe I told him he looked constipated. Who does that? Only me and my big nervous mouth.*

Then I practically strong-armed him into ordering a meal he’ll probably hate.

On the up side, I won’t have to worry if he’ll ever ask me out again since he’ll probably find an excuse to end this date early.

How many times had her ex-boyfriend told her to stop talking about her parents? “No one is interested,” he’d said more than once. Julia knew it was more the norm for people to gripe about how they were raised, but she didn’t have any horrific childhood stories to share. Before her mother had gotten sick, she couldn’t remember a time when she hadn’t been as happy to be around her parents as she was to be with her friends.

They’re good people. I won’t pretend to hate them just to sound cool.

Not that I have any chance of appearing sophisticated now that I led off with a reference to bowel blockage.

No wonder he’s giving me that look.

At which point of a failed evening do you toss up the white surrender flag and call it as it is?

“You were telling me about how your parents were the reason you came to New York,” Gio surprised her by saying.

He’s just being polite. “It’s a long story.”

He held her eyes and took her hand. “I don’t ask a question unless I’m interested in the answer.”

“Are you sure?”

His grip on her hand tightened. “The one promise I will make you is that I won’t lie to you, Julia. I’ve seen how destructive lies can be and I have no patience for them. You may not always like what I say, but it’ll be the truth.” He let out a long breath. “Now, tell me how being raised by these paragons of parents led you to a night-security job at my company.”

The story spilled out of her, broken only momentarily by the arrival of their food. She told him about her mother’s diagnosis of Alzheimer’s a few years back and how the disease had progressively worsened. She described how their lives had changed as the woman who had always led the family could no longer remember if she had turned the stove on to heat water for her tea. “My father became her full-time caretaker, and that meant neither of them were able to maintain the

business. I ran the actual store, but my father was supposed to be paying the taxes and the vendors. He fell behind and didn't tell me because he didn't want me to worry. By the time I found out, he was also behind on the mortgage. The bank threatened to auction off the land the factory and store are on. There are developers who are interested in that land. We have sixty days to come up with two hundred thousand dollars or the bank claims the property."

"That's not a lot of money. Surely the bank—"

"To you, that's not a lot of money. To people like me, it's a huge amount, and more than any bank would ever lend us."

He studied her quietly, then said, "I could loan you the money."

"If I sleep with you?" she countered, pulling her hand free of his.

"The loan would have nothing to do with what happens between us."

She shook her head in disbelief. "You said you wouldn't lie to me."

His face tightened and a slight flush spread up his cheeks. "Fine. I want you in my bed. Tonight. All night. And tomorrow night. I have a feeling that when I get you into my bed, you're going to be an addiction that takes me awhile to break. I don't want you working at my company. I don't want you living where you are. If that costs me the amount you need to help your father—so be it. I'll give you double if it gets me what I want."

Well, you ask for honesty—you get honesty.

Ouch.

"Do you pay all of your dates, or am I just the lucky one?"

"Most women are happy with jewelry and being seen in public with me, but I don't mind that you're more expensive. I told you, Julia. Tell me what you want and I'll make it happen."

Julia looked around the restaurant with new eyes. “And is this one of the places that you take those women?”

He didn’t answer.

“Of course it is. You didn’t take me here because this place is special to you. You brought me here because you bring everyone here. I should have known.” She stood up and threw her napkin on her uneaten food. “Apologize to Chef Cazon for me. I just lost my appetite.”

He stood and blocked her way. “Sit down, Julia.”

“No,” she said, and this time she didn’t care who was watching. “You don’t get it. I’m not for sale. If you really do want to be with me you’re going to have to wake up and do a whole hell of a lot better than this.” With that, she pushed past him and rushed out of the restaurant.

* * *

Gio almost followed her, but stopped when he saw she’d left her purse beside her chair. She wouldn’t get far without it.

He took several large bills out of his wallet and threw them in the middle of the table, then bent to retrieve her purse. The waiter rushed over. “You’re leaving, Mr. Andrade? Was there something wrong with the food?”

No, there is something wrong with me.

“The evening has merely taken an unexpected turn. Please make my apologies to the chef.”

With that, he walked out of the restaurant with Julia’s purse in his hand, not caring that the gossip rags would be abuzz with the story the next day. Right then, all he cared about was finding Julia.

They met on the street. She was headed back toward the restaurant. She walked up to him, gloriously decked out in her tight black dress and high heels. Her blue eyes were shooting daggers at him, and she’d never looked more beautiful to him. She stopped right in front of him and wordlessly held out her hand for her purse.

He didn't move to give it to her. Instead, he motioned for his driver to pull the town car around. "I chose the restaurant poorly."

Julia stubbornly folded her arms in front of her. "Yes, you did."

"I've never met anyone like you before, Julia. If you're confused, know that I share the feeling."

Relaxing somewhat, Julia looked away and then back at him, emotions darkening her eyes. "Money doesn't give you the right to treat people the way you do."

"It was not my intention to offend you." He handed her the purse.

She took it and hugged it to her stomach. "My mother didn't marry a man because she wanted something from him. She fell in love with my father and they built something together. You asked me why I came to New York and I started to tell you. But it's not only the money I'm looking for. I've spent my life very comfortably, being like my father. Joyfully lost in my art. No real responsibilities or worries. I see now how much my mother sheltered us."

Gio's heart started thudding painfully in his chest when Julia's eyes misted with tears. He was a man who took action, but in that moment he didn't know what to do.

"My mother is the strongest woman I know. I have to have that strength somewhere in me. I have to. If I can find it—I know I'll figure the rest out. Maybe I'll sell my jewelry to a chain, or I'll meet someone who is looking for a houseful of my dad's furniture. I don't know. But I do know what you're offering me is not what I'm looking for. I live where I can afford it. I work a job that allows me to network during the day, and hopefully I'll make connections that will lead to a solution. Not the solution you offered—but one I can live with." She looked down at the gown she was wearing. "I knew I had made a mistake when I left the store with this dress. I shouldn't have come here. This whole night was my fault. I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression."

Jaw tight, Gio said, “I don’t believe in love. Not the selfless kind you’re describing.” He reached forward and with his thumb brushed away the tear that ran down her cheek. “Don’t cry, Julia.”

She couldn’t help it. When it came to Gio, her emotions were raw and exposed.

“I’ve been selfish,” he said. “I keep trying to make you into someone who’ll fit into my life. I wish I had more to offer you, but I don’t. I’m not looking for marriage. I don’t want children. I’ve become so obsessed with getting into your bed that I told myself it doesn’t matter. But it does matter—to you.”

She smiled sadly. “I’m sorry.”

He cupped her face in his hand, rubbing his thumb lightly over her lips. “It’s not going to be easy knowing that you’re downstairs.”

She covered his hand with hers, then moved away from him. “It’s not easy to say no.”

“Get in the car,” he said briskly.

“I meant what I said,” she said urgently.

“My driver will take you home. I’m going to walk. I could use the fresh air.”

She studied his expression intently, then nodded and stepped into the door the driver held open for her.

In the quickly cooling New York night, Gio walked the ten blocks back to his office building. He needed to clear his head with work.

Chapter Thirteen

A few days later, Gio was at his desk reading over proposals on a possible new shale find in South America. The local governments were still discussing the feasibility of reaching it. The time was right to pick a horse in that race and invest. He would have preferred to finish one project before investing in another, but opportunities didn't wait until the timing was convenient. They arrived like a flash of lightning and left just as quickly.

He'd grown his family's company by knowing where these strikes would happen and being ready to harness their power when they did. Often, he was in and out of an area before his competition knew a door had opened.

He was decisive because hesitations cost money.

A knock on the door was instantly followed by its swinging open without waiting for his response. *This ends now.* Gio stood and roared his displeasure. "I said I was not to be disturbed."

"No wonder Rena called me. You look like shit." Rena's older brother, Kane, one of Gio's closest friends, walked in, completely unfettered by the greeting he'd received.

"Thanks. Don't you have a job for her at your company yet?" Still not smiling, he crossed the room to shake his friend's hand.

Although Kane now wore expensive suits and styled his hair conservatively, Gio would forever see his friend as he'd looked in college: unruly hair, defiantly spiked in front long before that was the fashion. Kane came from first-generation money, which brought its own challenges. Such children often struggled with addictions and excess. Luckily Kane and Rena's parents had instilled a good work ethic in both of them. "She's happy here," Kane said after shaking his hand. He gave his friend a long once-over. "When you're not yelling at her. She says you're having a rough week."

“She needs to learn to mind her own business.”

“Yeah, good luck with that.” Kane walked in and sat in Gio’s chair, leaning back far enough that Gio was convinced the former quarterback would break it.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Gio said in a harsh tone. Kane smiled. They were close like brothers, and apparently that relationship had given Kane immunity to a tone that would have intimidated other men.

“I also spoke to Luke. He said he’s worried about you. Rena is worried about you. After the article I read in the paper the other day, I’ll admit I’m a little concerned myself. The photo of you at Le Loire with that woman in a black dress preparing to give you the Heimlich maneuver was classic, but I think I preferred the one with you chasing her out the door with her purse.”

Rubbing his tired eyes with both hands, Gio groaned. “I completely forgot to call anyone about those. Shit.”

Sounding much too amused, Kane said, “The Internet is on fire with an article about it. ‘Billionaire Bachelor With a Sensitive Side.’ Rena said they have photos of you outside the restaurant caressing her face and looking longingly into her eyes. You’ve got it pretty bad for this one. Who is she?”

Gio turned away from his friend and looked out the window in frustration. “No one important.”

Kane left the chair, and his tone turned serious. “I get it. You haven’t been yourself since you came back from that engagement party with your uncles. If you’re using this woman to cheer yourself up, fine. I just want to make sure she’s not a symptom of something else going on that you’re not sharing with anyone.”

“If I had anything I wanted to talk to you about, I have your number.”

“You say that, but looking at you, I don’t believe it.”

“Kane, I’ll say this as kindly as I can. Go get a testosterone shot. You spend way too much time with your sister. You’re beginning to sound like her.”

“Sometimes she’s right. Rena says this mystery woman works here. That’s not your style.”

If the conversation had been with anyone but Kane, it would have ended right now. Kane had been a good friend to him for too many years to take out his frustration on him. He closed his eyes for a moment, finding the calm he sought by shutting down inside. He opened his eyes, once again in control, and forced a smile. “I’m fine.”

The joke removed the tension between them, but Kane still looked concerned. “I don’t believe you. Are you going to tell me, or do I have to come back later and get you drunk? Midday tequila shots are no longer my style, but you look like you could use a few.”

There wasn’t a doubt in Gio’s mind that Kane would return if he wasn’t satisfied with how the conversation went, so Gio ground out, “What do you know, Kane?”

“Are you okay?”

Running his hand through his hair, Gio admitted the truth. “No.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sleeping. I’m not eating. I can’t concentrate. There’s something wrong with me.”

“Maybe you’re in love.”

“Don’t be a fucking idiot. I’m serious. I could have a brain tumor.”

“I’ll have to ask Luke, but I’ve never heard of a tumor causing a man to chase after a woman while clutching her purse. It is an illness, though. And, I hear, a degenerative one. Next you’ll be buying her tampons.”

Gio pinched the bridge of his nose in irritation. “I’m trying remember why we’re friends, but right now it’s difficult.”

“Are you even dating this woman?”

“No.”

“Screwing her?”

“No. I told you. She’s nothing to me.”

Shaking his head with humor, Kane said, “I wish I could help you, Gio, but you’re already too far gone. What are you going to do?”

“Nothing. I considered her an option for something more, but it wasn’t worth the trouble. You know how I feel about anything serious.”

“You’re such a pussy,” Kane said.

“Excuse me?” Gio roared.

“You heard me. Rena says this is the type of woman a man marries. She said you’re shaking in your shoes at the idea, and I think she’s right. If you like this woman, date her. Don’t hide in your office pretending that facial hair looks good on you.”

“It’s not that easy,” Gio growled. Even the thought of Julia brought a swell of emotion to the surface—one that he fought to control. “I don’t like who I am around her. I’m jealous. I’m impulsive. I say stupid shit.”

Kane smiled sympathetically. “It eventually happens to all of us. That’s nature’s way of ensuring we perpetuate our species—by making some of them so fucking irresistible that we lose our minds.” He looked down at his watch. “I have a meeting across town in a few minutes. I should head out.” He gave Gio a pat on the back. “You’ll survive this, Gio. Hang in there. At least it’s not a brain tumor.”

After Kane left, Gio sat at his desk and thought about what he’d said. Although he disagreed with the diagnosis his friend had given him, some of his advice had merit. If this were a business deal, nothing would stop him from closing on it.

It was only in his personal life that he held himself back. Deny. Control. Remember your duty. Keep emotions in check. Do nothing that risks the stability of the family or the company.

Julia endangered all that.

Around her, he didn’t care about anything else.

And Rena was right: That had him shaking in his black Bruno Magli shoes.

“Rena, is Julia on tonight?”

“No, she called in sick.”

His stomach flipped painfully. “Clear my schedule for today.”

“Of course.”

He didn’t give himself time to second-guess his decision. He removed his tie and jacket and threw them on the chair before heading out of his office. As he walked by Rena’s desk, he growled, “I’m not happy with you.”

She smiled back at him. “I can live with that. Now go see what’s wrong with Julia. I have a feeling it’s the same thing that ails you.”

* * *

Still in her nightgown, with her hair sticking up wildly in all directions, Julia sat in the middle of her bed, hugging her knees. *I should throw the roses away. Keeping them is a constant reminder of the fool I made of myself.*

Gio hadn’t called.

Not that I expected him to after how our date ended.

What did I think would happen? That we’d discover we had more in common than bits and pieces that are hot for each other? Was I expecting to wow him with witty dialogue? Floor him with my sophisticated banter?

That a bad decision could lead to something wonderful?

I’m such an idiot.

He has been honest about what he wants. I’m the one who keeps wavering and driving us both crazy. What did Mom used to say? “If you plant a potato, you get a potato.” Julia used to roll her eyes at her mother whenever she’d say it. It was another way of saying, “If you go looking for trouble, you’ll find it.”

Or, if you date a man who says he's willing to pay you for sex—you end up feeling like a woman who was offered money for sex. Even if he wrapped the offer in a cushion of a thousand roses.

Or worse, you regret not saying yes, even though you hate yourself for wanting him enough to consider shelving your self-respect and giving in.

I can't keep calling in sick to Cogent.

But I can't watch him walk by me like I don't matter.

I'll quit tomorrow. Then I'll pick myself up, write a new résumé, find another night job, and get back out there. It'll be okay. This doesn't change anything.

She flipped on the television and searched until she found a sappy movie she knew would have her in tears. *I'll be strong again tomorrow. Right now, I'm going to let myself wallow.*

She reached for a box of tissues and lost herself in a story she'd watched a hundred times before, sobbing through scenes she knew well enough to mouth the words to, and hugged her pillow to her stomach as the heroine came to the same conclusion she had: *Men suck.*

A knock on her apartment door echoed through the room. She didn't have many friends in the city and most of them worked during the day. She knelt on her bed and looked at herself in the mirror. Yesterday's mascara was smudged beneath two bloodshot eyes. Her nose was red and puffy from crying. She scrambled to pick up the tissues that were scattered across her bed. "Who is it?" she called out.

The answer was concealed by the noise of the television. She turned it off and mentally smacked herself for saying anything. *I should have pretended I wasn't here. My television was on, though. So what? People leave them on all the time.*

Hastily wiping off any makeup she could, she put a bathrobe on over her nightgown and went onto her tiptoes to peer out the peephole.

Paul.

She turned and slumped against the door in relief, even as she tried to deny a wave of disappointment that it wasn't Gio. *He's not coming. Accept it.*

Julia unlocked the door and opened it, smiling when Paul held up a bag from the neighborhood deli. He was dressed in jeans a tight T-shirt that accentuated his enormous muscles. The sight should have been pleasurable, but seeing Paul only reminded Julia of how Gio had looked the first time she'd seen him. *Stop it.* She chastised herself for torturing herself with an image of someone she had no intention of ever seeing again.

Paul whistled appreciatively at the number of flowers that still filled every corner of the floor. Then he handed Julia the paper bag. "When you called in again, Tom and I started to worry. He asked me to come check on you. You look awful. Are you fighting what we had? Do you want me to run to the pharmacy?"

A quick peek into the bag revealed soup. "No, I'm fine," she said and burst into tears. Soup reminded her of how her mother had always taken care of her. Thinking of her mother made her feel even worse about moping over problems that were trivial by comparison. She wanted to call her mother to talk about Gio but knew she couldn't. She wanted to call Gio to talk about her mother, but that door was also closed. She suddenly felt very alone.

"Hey, hey, hey. Don't cry. I handle throwup much better than tears."

His comment made Julia laugh, even as tears continued running down her cheeks. "I'm not sick."

He reached out and drew her into his arms. His embrace nearly cut off her oxygen. "Come here." He hugged her tighter. "Is this about You Know Who?"

Julia sniffed and nodded, finding comfort in the warmth of her hulking friend's arms. "I know he is wrong for me, but I can't seem to control myself when I'm around him. It's like my brain shuts off. I'm quitting Cogent tomorrow, Paul. I hope it doesn't leave you guys short staffed. I can't go back there."

Paul set her back from him. “Hang on. I care, but I have to stop hugging you before I get a stiffie.”

Julia’s eyes widened and she burst out laughing, imagining what Tom would say if he were there. “Paul ...”

He smiled unabashedly. “Hey, I’m human. Would you rather I tell you or let you feel it?”

A wave of laughter erupted from her, then quelled as a thought came to her. “I’m going to miss you.”

“Are you sure you need to quit?”

“Yes.”

“Did he hurt you?” Paul puffed up like a rooster preparing to defend one of his hens.

From behind Paul, through the still-open door, Gio’s voice carried a deadly cold tone. “Well, this is an unexpected turn of events.”

Initial embarrassment was replaced with anger. *I have nothing to feel embarrassed about.* “What are you doing here?”

Gio stepped into the small apartment, which suddenly felt claustrophobically small with the two large men circling each other. “The better question is, what is *he* doing here?”

Raising her chin defiantly, Julia said, “You don’t have the right to ask.”

Gio’s eyes narrowed and his attention focused on Paul. “Don’t you work for me?”

“Not until five o’clock,” Paul answered in a tone that goaded Gio.

As the two of them squared off, Julia snapped, “He came by to make sure I was okay. Not that I owe you an explanation. You and I said everything we needed to say the other night.”

Looking away from Julia to Paul, Gio said, “I refuse to discuss this in front of him.”

Paul planted his feet. “I’m not leaving unless she tells me to go.”

Although Julia appreciated the sentiment, she didn’t want them both to lose their jobs because she’d sent Gio mixed messages. “I’m fine, Paul. Go. We’ll talk later.”

Reluctantly, Paul nodded. As he passed Gio, he knocked shoulder to shoulder with him aggressively. “Keep your hands to yourself. If I hear that you—”

Gio punched him square in the face and sent the man falling back against the wall, sinking down to the floor from the perfect hit and sending several vases spilling onto the carpet. Julia rushed to Paul’s side. “Oh, my God. You broke his nose. It’s bleeding.”

Then she spun on Gio. “How could you? How could you hit him? He was only trying to protect me.”

Gio was momentarily at a loss for words.

Paul pulled himself back up from the floor and wiped the blood on the sleeve of his T-shirt. “You want to try that again?”

Leaning in with a threat, Gio said, “If you touch me, I’ll gladly send you to the floor a second time.”

Julia wedged herself between the two of them. “Stop it. Stop it right now.” She looked over her shoulder at her hulking friend and said, “Paul, I’ll handle this. Don’t get fired because of me.”

“I’m not afraid of Mr. Fancy Pants.”

“I know you’re not, Paul, but Mr. Andrade’s right. We do have to talk. And we can’t do that with you here.”

“If you’re sure.”

She looked at Gio’s still-angry expression and nodded. *Mr. Fancy Pants doesn’t scare me, either.* “I’m sure.”

With one final glare at Gio, Paul walked out of the apartment.

Gio closed the door firmly, then turned to Julia. “I don’t like the idea of you with another man.”

Julia stood her ground. “Paul is not another man. Well, he is a man, but he’s harmless. He brought soup.”

Advancing on Julia, Gio said, “He wasn’t here just because he thought you were sick.” The desire in Gio’s eyes sent a shiver of anticipation through Julia.

She took a step back and knocked over a vase. The water spilled onto her bare foot, reminding her she was still in her nightgown. “You didn’t have to punch him.”

“Yes, I did.”

When her next step brought the back of her legs against the edge of her bed, she wrapped her bathrobe tighter around herself. “Why are you here, Gio?”

He didn’t stop until only an inch separated them. A mere inch. Easily crossed and dangerously tempting. “You know why.”

Squaring her shoulders, Julia met his eyes boldly. “You told me the other day that this wasn’t a good idea.”

He untied the belt of her bathrobe with one hand, whipped it free of its loops, and threw it behind him. “I changed my mind.”

“And what if I haven’t?” she whispered.

He eased the robe off her shoulders, dropping it to the floor and bending down to kiss her newly exposed collarbone. “Then tell me to leave.”

She closed her eyes as every fiber of her body began to burn for him. “I can’t,” she admitted hoarsely. “I want you to stay.”

He reached forward, grabbed the front of her thin nightgown, and tore it straight down the middle. Those rough hands turned gentle when they reached for her. He ran one hand reverently down her neck, across the swell of her breast, and down to possessively cup her sex. “I’ve never wanted a

woman the way I want you, Julia.” He slid a finger between her folds and captured her excited gasp with his mouth.

Julia opened herself to him. She clutched his chest as his hands explored her body. Their tongues danced and teased while his stroking became more intimate. His finger delved into her wet center while his mouth conquered hers. Stroke by stroke, he claimed her, enflamed her, brought her to a place where she was shaking with need.

Urgently, Julia fumbled to pull his shirt free of his trousers. She tore it open with the same enthusiasm he’d used to rip hers.

His free hand sought and worshipped her left nipple, twisting it lightly, then teasing the tip of it with his thumb. He was playing her body expertly, and she was helpless to resist the desire that whipped through her. She undid his belt and trousers, and sighed into his mouth with pleasure when her hands finally freed his rock-hard dick.

He was taking his time, even though he was clearly as excited by her as she was by him. His heart was beating wildly in his chest.

There was heady power in knowing he was as close to losing control as she was. Julia broke free from their kiss and nipped his muscular neck playfully. He groaned with pleasure, and Julia began to kiss her way down his chest. His hands came up to grip her head, but he didn’t stop her.

She kissed her way down his flat stomach, dropped to her knees before him, and took him deeply into her mouth. His hands fisted in her hair. And still she took him deeper. His firm ass flexed beneath one of her hands while her other hand guided him in and out of her mouth.

She thought he would come in her mouth and she welcomed the idea, but he pulled out, stepped out of his pants, and threw her on her bed. The nightgown, still hanging from her shoulders like a cape, tangled beneath her. He reached into the pocket of his pants and, without taking his eyes off her, sheathed himself in a condom. He was beside her a moment later, rolling her on top of him and lowering her down onto

him. He powerfully thrust upward, holding her by her hips as he did.

She sat up and threw her head back with a cry of pleasure. Although she was above him, he was in command now, driving into her, deeper and deeper with each thrust. She balanced on her knees and arched backward.

He sat up, pulled her forward and took one of her breasts into his hungry mouth while he raised and lowered her onto him. His teeth nipped her, then his hot tongue lapped each breast, a mix of pleasure and pain that sent Julia into writhing moans.

Rolling them both over, he took her hands and pinned them above her head, poising himself above her. He teased her by rubbing his tip over her clit while he watched her expression. “You’re mine, Julia. Say it.”

Even though she was practically sobbing for release, she couldn’t say what he wanted to hear. Not without knowing what being his meant. She shook her head and closed her eyes.

He groaned in her ear and drove his shaft deeply into her with one powerful thrust. Julia welcomed him deeper and gave herself to the orgasm that swept through her as he continued to pound down into her. A moment later, he shuddered and came inside her.

He rolled onto his side and disposed of the condom, then pulled her back into his arms. They were both breathing hard. He buried his face in her hair and whispered, “You drive me crazy, Julia.”

Naked and pressed up against the man she’d pined for all day, Julia chided him gently. “You think you’re any better? I can’t believe you hit Paul.”

He took her chin in his hand and met her eyes seriously. “I don’t want to talk about other men in your life.”

Julia said, “It’s not like that. I told you—”

Gio claimed her mouth with his and kissed her until she was squirming against him with need once again.

When the kiss ended, Julia slumped against Gio and laid her head on his chest. *Could he really be jealous of Paul?*

That would mean he cares about me, wouldn't it?

Or is this still about the crazy attraction between us?

What are we doing?

Oh, my God, why did I sleep with him? I should have told them both to leave.

“You’re coming home with me,” Gio said while he absently traced a hand down her bare back.

Raising herself up on one elbow, Julia said, “Didn’t we already discuss this?”

He smiled devilishly and rolled her back so he was above her as he accepted her challenge. He claimed her mouth with his and held himself just above her, his hard dick nudging against her wet sex. His eyes burned with desire for her as he asked, “Do you have a condom in that drawer beside your bed?”

She’d never wanted to say yes so badly, but she didn’t. “No.”

Instead of being irritated by her answer, he arched himself off her and repositioned himself lower on the bed. He kissed the small swell of her stomach, then spread her legs wide and blew lightly on her exposed clit. “The only word I want you to say is ‘yes.’”

Even though her body was humming with need for him, she shook her head. “No.”

Holding her eyes with his, he spread her lower lips and licked her from back to front, lingering on her growing nub. His other hand slid beneath her to squeeze her ass possessively. “I’m going to enjoy changing your mind.”

Julia clenched the comforter on either side of her as he plunged his tongue inside her, withdrew, then plunged in again. He rubbed her clit firmly with a rhythm that sent fire shooting through her. He blew lightly on her nub again. His tongue was everywhere while his fingers continued their war

on her senses. He replaced his tongue with two fingers and found a spot that sent Julia out of her mind.

She cried out and thrashed against his hand. He held her easily and continued to pump his fingers in and out of her. When she was nearing climax, he stopped and looked up at her. “You know you want to say yes to me. Don’t fight it. Give yourself to it.”

He moved his fingers within her again, pausing to tug on her clit gently with his teeth, while never taking his eyes off her. “Say yes, Julia.”

A wave of heat rose within Julia that consumed her. She came with her eyes open, staring into his dark ones while crying out, “Yes. Oh, yes. God, yes.”

As she came back to earth, she thought, “What did I just agree to?” She realized she’d asked the question aloud as he rolled onto his back and lifted her so she was once again above him.

“Everything,” he said with a lusty smile.

His answer sent a nervous thrill through her. *What is everything?*

He took one of her hands and wrapped it around his still throbbing erection. She didn’t need more prompting than that.

I may not be up for everything.

But I’m down for this.

She eagerly took him in her mouth and took him to heaven.

* * *

In the dark of her heavily flower-scented apartment, Gio held a naked, sleeping Julia in his arms and stared up at the ceiling. He couldn’t remember a time in his adult life when he’d hit anyone. He didn’t do that. He stayed in control.

Until Julia.

From the moment he’d decided to bring her to the wedding with him—an act that had been uncharacteristically impulsive—he’d become someone he didn’t recognize. Emotion was

best left out of most decisions. A cool head and determination equaled profit.

His philosophy hadn't made him a lonely man, as some might expect. He knew he wasn't a bad-looking man, but he was also jaded enough to realize that he could have been much less attractive and still gotten laid on a regular basis. Wealth did that. It was the ultimate aphrodisiac for enough women that he hadn't realized until he met Julia how bored he'd become with the predictability of it.

Julia was like a day of sunshine after years of rain. Everything about her felt good—too good.

Fucking her should have made me want her less.

I should be gathering my clothes and calling for my car. Instead, he pulled Julia closer against him. He looked around. The light in the miniscule bathroom illuminated the room enough for him to see the entire place from where he lay. One wall had a small cupboard, a portable stove top, and a microwave. A wooden chair and table were covered with small boxes.

A police car went by outside, the siren blaring loudly through the thin walls. He ran a hand absently down the back of her head and buried it in her long hair. *I don't even let women sleep over at my place—why do I think moving her in would work out?*

He looked down at her peaceful profile. *Because the alternative is leaving her here again, and that is not going to happen.*

She stirred against him. “Are you awake?” she whispered.

He ran his hand through her hair again. “Yes, and enjoying watching you sleep.”

She stiffened. “I hope I wasn't drooling or anything.”

He felt uncharacteristically lighthearted and joked gently, “Gentlemen don't wipe and tell.”

She slapped his chest playfully. “That's awful. Funny, but awful.”

He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. “I don’t have a reputation for being the nicest man. You’ll have to get used to it.”

She raised herself up on one elbow and looked down at him, gloriously unselfconscious about her nudity. “You say that like we ... like we ...”

He tucked a loose tendril behind her ear. “We?”

She looked down at him and chewed her bottom lip. “Tonight was wonderful, but it didn’t change anything between us.”

He pulled her back down against him. “I’d say it changed everything.”

“What happened to us wanting completely different things?” she asked.

He leaned down and kissed her shoulder. “I’d say we’ve proven that theory wrong.”

“I’m being serious.”

“If you’re hoping for a declaration of love, Julia, you’re not going to get one. That’s not who I am. But I want you beside me in my bed each night. I want to wake up to you. I can’t stay away from you no matter how many times I tell myself I should. For now, let that be enough.”

She closed her eyes and laid her head down on his chest. “I don’t want you to buy me anything.”

“I won’t give you a goddamned thing. I promise.”

She pinched his side lightly. “You’re such an ass.”

“But you’re coming home with me.”

“Yes,” she said softly.

It was the sweetest word he’d ever heard.

Chapter Fourteen

Julia called in her resignation the next day and no one seemed surprised. She'd done it during the day because she couldn't face Tom and Paul. She wasn't ready to answer the questions they'd ask.

Gio sent a driver over midmorning to pick her up and bring her to his apartment. It felt unreal handing his driver luggage as if she were going on a vacation. She couldn't meet the driver's eyes. *Does he know? Does he care? Has he done this a hundred times before?*

He grunted when he picked up her second case—the one that was full of her samples, her tools, and all of her magazines. *Hey, hey. Be careful with that. That's only my life in there.*

The drive to Gio's building uptown gave Julia far too much time to think. Through the car window, she studied the blur of pedestrians on the sidewalks and wondered what had brought each of them to New York.

How many of them reached their dreams? How many found themselves lost on tangents that distracted them long enough that their dreams slipped away?

The bellman met Julia at the curb and took her luggage with a smile. He led her to the elevator and rode with her, silently, to the top. The entire experience was surreal. An older man in a suit opened the door to Gio's apartment and introduced himself as Miles, the butler.

He brought Julia's luggage to Gio's bedroom and asked if she would like him to unpack for her. The question surprised Julia. He was about her father's age, and the idea of him unpacking her things made her uncomfortable.

“You do that?”

“Of course, Miss Bennett.”

“But then you’d see all of my ... stuff,” she said and blushed.

A small smile stretched the man’s lips. Blandly, he said, “Whatever you prefer. I don’t mind.”

“Because you’re used to it?” She couldn’t contain her curiosity. “*Are* you used to it? Does Mr. Andrade have many women stay here?”

“I really can’t say,” he said and took a step to leave. “If there is nothing you need I’ll leave you to unpack.”

Julia nodded in understanding. “You can’t tell me because of some butler-boss confidentially agreement? Gotcha.” She put one of her bags on the bed. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable with the question. I mean, does it matter anyway what the answer would have been? If you said that he’d had a hundred women live here already, what would I do—run? I know this isn’t permanent. It’s not even a good idea, really. It’s just that he asked me when I was ... when we were ... I couldn’t think. I should have stalled—given myself time to think this through. Because here I am now ... wondering if I made the right choice.”

Miles stopped at the door and turned back to look at her. “Miss Bennett?”

Julia raised a hand to stop him. “You don’t have to say it. I shouldn’t have asked. Don’t risk losing your job by telling me anything.”

“I was wondering if you were hungry.”

Julia covered her eyes with one hand and wished she could disappear. “Oh. Yes. Food. No. I mean, no. I’m not hungry. Thank you.” *Stop talking. Why did I think I could do this?*

Instead of immediately leaving, Miles cleared his throat and said, “I have worked for Mr. Andrade since his mid-twenties. You are the first woman who has ever brought luggage.”

Julia lowered her hand. She didn’t want to read too much into that information. “Really?”

With a slight incline of his head, Miles said, "I have also never made breakfast for anyone except Mr. Andrade."

Although there was nothing in Mile's expression to hint how he felt one way or another about her staying there, she was touched by what he'd revealed to her. "Thank you, Miles."

"You're welcome, Miss Bennett. Mr. Andrade had me clear out the other bedroom for you to use as a studio. Please tell me if you need any help setting it up."

He closed the door behind him, and Julia sat on the edge of the bed she knew she'd share with Gio that night. *A studio? For me?*

I don't need that unless I'm staying for a while.

Like, moving in.

Holy shit.

Did I just move in with Gio?

* * *

Gio came home to Julia that night, and every night for the next week. Beyond the lovemaking, he enjoyed having her in his apartment. They fell into a comfortable pattern over the next week. They made love each night, woke early, and often made love again.

The more time he spent with her, the more he enjoyed the simple pleasures. Watching her wake in the morning. Wondering what she would say today that would make his unflappable butler turn away to hide a smile. Coming home and having someone to talk over his day with.

For the first time in his life, Gio found himself sharing stories about the project he was working on. He found Julia's ideas refreshing and often thought provoking. Although he wouldn't admit it to anyone, she was the reason he turned down the Atwater deal. There were other projects he could work on, ones that were less controversial, one he could be proud to discuss.

Her opinion mattered to him in a way that no one's had before. It both scared and inspired him. Just as she did.

Julia had meant what she'd said. She didn't want money from him. She didn't want gifts from him. Although she didn't immediately apply for another job, she used her time during the day to add to her jewelry line. Each night when he came home she had a new piece to show him, and a new story on how she had reached out to another jewelry store.

It would've only taken one call from him for her to make the sale. But she had made him promise not to make that call. She wanted to do this on her own. And for reasons he couldn't explain to himself, he wanted her to have that. He wanted her to know that she had done it on her own. The more they spoke, the more he understood the sale of the jewelry was as much about the journey as it was the money.

Gio didn't ask himself what the future held for them. He had her in his life, in his bed, and for now, that was enough.

Chapter Fifteen

Julia stepped out of the apartment building one morning and watched a long black stretch limo pull up beside her. *Maddy again?*

The back window rolled down and an older woman with dark brown hair done up in a sophisticated chignon waved for Julia to approach the limo. Everything about her said refined sophistication. Julia looked over her shoulder and then pointed at her own chest in question.

The beautiful older woman nodded impatiently, and Julia walked over. *Maybe she's lost and needs directions to some charity event?*

“Julia Bennett?”

“Yes?” Julia answered in confusion. “Do I know you?”

“No, but I know you, and we need to talk.” The driver came around and opened the limo door for Julia to enter.

Julia looked back and forth from the Cogent Solutions building ahead to the dark interior of the vehicle. “I have an appointment I need to get to this morning. I can't be late.”

The woman leaned out and gave a small smile. “This will only take a few minutes and could be quite a lucrative opportunity for you.”

“You're interested in my jewelry?”

“I don't discuss business in the street,” she said coldly and sat back in the limo.

They say opportunity knocks. No one ever mentioned that it could pull up beside you in a limo. *Am I crazy to think about getting in? My life is already so off course.*

On the other hand, if I don't get in, I will never know what she might have offered me. For all I know, she is an eccentric gem collector and wants me to create the perfect pieces to showcase her stones.

Or she's a high-paid madam, and this is how she recruits.

Julia remembered the harsh lines on the older woman's face and thought, *No, she looks way too uptight to have had sex in the last decade.*

What kind of a businesswoman am I if I won't even listen to a proposal?

Julia slid into the limo and tried not to jump when the driver closed the door behind her. Her hands went suddenly cold when the vehicle pulled out into traffic. "Where are we going?"

The woman's smile didn't reach her eyes. "We'll merely circle the block."

Of course. How silly of me to worry.

I really have to stop getting into limos with people I don't know.

"I've done research on you since I first heard about you. Have you sold any of your jewelry yet? Made any noteworthy connections?"

"I have some leads," Julia said vaguely. *Don't show your hand in negotiations. She must have heard about me from one of the entrepreneurs I showed my line to.* A burst of excitement started to build in her stomach. *Persistence does pay off. My name is out there. This could be it.*

"You must be getting anxious about your father's company. Your time is running out to save it, isn't it?"

The hair on the back of Julia's neck rose. *I never mention that while I pitch.* "I'm sorry, what did you say your name was again?"

"I didn't," the woman said, flashing another smile that did little to calm Julia's nerves. "Who I am is irrelevant." She took out an envelope and tossed it onto Julia's lap. "What matters is that I am willing to pay you to go home to your family."

Julia opened the thick envelope and looked back at the woman in confusion.

“It’s one hundred thousand dollars. You’ll receive another hundred thousand once you’ve left New York and are back in Rhode Island.”

Julia’s mouth dropped open. “I don’t understand.”

“That is how much you need, isn’t it?”

Shaking her head, Julia asked, “Yes, but I’m confused. Do you want me to work on my jewelry back in Rhode Island?”

“Keep your trinkets, dear. Just get the hell out of New York.”

Julia’s hand closed tightly on the envelope as she studied the woman’s features, and an awful realization came to her. “Are you Gio’s mother?”

“The resemblance is strong, no?”

Only in the worst possible way. You both assume I can be bought. “Why would you want me to leave New York?” Understanding hit her like a sledgehammer to the stomach. She held up the money, outraged heat spreading up her neck. “Are you upset that I’m living with him?”

“George isn’t serious about you. You’re the flavor of the month. Take the money. It’ll last a lot longer than whatever you think you have with him. All I ask is that you leave before the weekend.”

Julia couldn’t remember ever being so insulted. “I’m not going anywhere. Well, I am going somewhere. I mean, we are. We’re going to a wedding. Not ours.”

“Perhaps you think I’m kidding? I couldn’t be more serious.” An ugly expression darkened the woman’s face. “How much does your father’s company mean to you? You can save it, and no one ever needs to know how you did it. Tell me, are a few romps with my son worth watching your family lose everything?”

Her words sent a chill down Julia’s back. She laid the envelope down on the seat beside her and reached for the door handle. “It’s not like that. And my father’s company is going to be fine. I still have time to make a sale.”

“If you’re counting on my son to give you money, he won’t. A week from now he won’t even remember you.”

Julia hastily climbed out of the limo. *That’s quite a family you have there, Gio.*

Holy shit.

Instead of taking the bus down to the Diamond District, Julia called and rescheduled her appointment. She knew she couldn’t tell Gio what had happened, but she needed to see him.

* * *

Tom glared at her when she entered the building. She walked over to the security station.

She looked at the stranger sitting next to him and asked, “Where’s Paul?” Guilt struck Julia when she realized that she’d been so swept away by Gio that she hadn’t called Paul to check on him. *I’ve always believed that the right match made you a better version of yourself. I’m so absorbed in what’s going on with Gio, I didn’t think about Paul. What does that mean? Is Gio the wrong man for me, or would I be an ass regardless of who I’m with?*

Tom put the clipboard down decisively. “Where do you think he is? Your boyfriend fired him.”

Julia frowned. “No.”

Tom glared at her again. “I knew you’d be trouble from the first time I saw you. You couldn’t just do your job, could you?”

Julia wished the floor would open and swallow her up. She felt horrible that she’d played a role in separating them. She’d spent enough time with both of them to know that loss was the source of Tom’s anger. He would miss working with his best friend. “I’ll talk to Gio ... Mr. Andrade. I’ll fix this.”

“You’ve done enough. Paul’s still looking for a job. He doesn’t interview well.”

Despite Tom’s angry tone, Julia leaned closer. “I am sorry. I didn’t mean for this to happen. You know that.”

Her words softened Tom's expression slightly. "I told Paul to check on you. I guess it's partially my fault."

"There has to be something I can do."

Gio was a reasonable man. Was it too late to ask Gio to hire Paul back?

Rena was at her desk when Julia entered Gio's outer office. "Is he in?" Julia asked tentatively.

Rena stepped out from behind her desk. "He is. How are you?"

"Good," Julia said, straightening her shoulders in determination. "Could you tell him that I'm here?"

Instead of reaching for her phone, Rena looked her over. "Are you still going to the wedding with him?"

"Yes, is that a problem?" Julia asked cautiously. *Seriously? And they say people in small towns can't mind their own business? This is ridiculous.*

Rena's eyebrows rose in reaction to Julia's tone. "I was wondering if you felt ready."

"Ready?"

"Have you looked over the invitation list? You should wear your own jewelry when you go. Who knows, you may find an investor. If you'd like, I could help you recognize who's who."

It was hard not to be suspicious of the kind offer. Julia wasn't about to be fooled twice in one day. "Why would you do that?"

"I like you?" When Julia looked unconvinced, Rena added, "How about, because I have the feeling that if our roles were reversed you would help me?"

Julia let her suspicions fall away. Rena had never given her a reason not to trust her. And it wouldn't hurt to go into the situation as prepared as possible. *I used to think I liked surprises. I'm not finding that as true in this situation.* "I have to ask Gio something, but then, yes, I'd like to talk to you about what to expect tomorrow."

“Great. If you don’t have your dress yet, I know the perfect place to look for one.”

A dress? Of course I need a dress. Shit. “Thank you for the offer, but I can wear the one I just bought.”

“No, that one has been in the papers. You need something new.” Rena went back to her desk, sat down, and picked up her phone. “Julia is here to see you. Yes, I’ll send her right in, but before I do ... one quick question. Do you mind if I take her dress shopping tonight and charge it to you? That’s what I thought.” She hung up and smiled at Julia. “All set. He told me to have you back early.” Rena winked at Julia. “I personally think you should make him cool his heels waiting for you. He’s far too used to getting what he wants.”

“I don’t need another dress. I don’t want him to buy me anything,” Julia said adamantly.

Rena stood and crossed to stand near her. “Whoa. I’m sorry. I just assumed ...”

“That I’m with him for what I can get from him?”

Rena raised her hands in truce. “No, that you’d want something new for a high-profile wedding, and that since he invited you I figured he should buy it for you.”

“Well, I don’t, and he shouldn’t.”

“Hey,” Rena said gently, “my family drags me to so many social events I have a closet full of dresses I’ll never wear again. You could borrow a couple.”

Releasing her breath slowly, Julia searched Rena’s face. “If you’re sure.”

A wide smile spread across Rena’s face. “We’ll make a girls’ night of it.”

“I’d like that.”

“Julia,” Gio said from the doorway. She thanked Rena one last time and crossed the office to Gio. He closed the door and locked it behind her, taking her mouth passionately as if they’d been apart far longer than the few hours they’d had been

separated. She wrapped her arms around his neck and gave herself fully to the moment.

When he broke off the kiss, he touched his forehead to hers, still holding her in his arms. “I thought having you at my place would make it easier for me to concentrate, but I find myself watching the clock.” He claimed her mouth again and Julia shuddered against him with pleasure. “You’re one powerful addiction.”

She could have said the same. A moment in his presence and nothing else mattered. *Want me on the desk? Let me scramble on up there. How about the couch? The carpet? I don’t care who knows what we’re doing or who walks in. I want you on me, in me, licking whatever you want to. Just don’t stop.*

He raised his head, breathing as raggedly as she was. “Sorry, I lose my head around you. Did you come to see me for a reason, or just for this?” The lusty smile he gave her sent heat rushing through her. “Either is fine with me.”

Julia put a shaky hand up to her kiss-swollen mouth. *Did I come here for a reason?*

You know, besides this?

She shook her head to clear it. *I know I’m forgetting something.*

He looped his hands behind her and pulled her full against the evidence of his arousal. “I like that you get along with Rena, but you don’t need a dress for the wedding. I have no intention of going anymore.”

Julia pulled back. “Why?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.” Julia realized that although they had spoken about many things over the last week, he had avoided all personal topics. “We said we were going. They’re expecting us. Maddy will be hurt if we don’t show up.”

“I’ve made my decision.”

“Without even talking to me about it?”

“It’s my family.”

“And none of my business,” she said, unable to keep some of the hurt she felt out of her voice.

His silence was his answer.

Julia stepped out of his embrace. He didn’t try to stop her, and that confused her even more. Was his mother right—at least when it came to how temporary their union was? Julia didn’t feel like the flavor of the month. What they had felt special. *But maybe that’s how he makes every woman feel?*

In that moment of resistance, she remembered part of why she’d come to see him. “About Paul.”

Gio frowned. “Why are we still talking about that man?”

She looked him in the eye and said, “I didn’t know you fired him. I understand that he went too far, but he was protecting me. I feel awful that he lost his job over me. He and Tom have been friends forever. I can’t be the reason they don’t work together anymore.”

Gio returned to his desk and sat down, a not-so-subtle act of dismissal. “Was there something else you wanted?”

Julia glared at him. “Sometimes I don’t like you very much.”

He was around his desk with a predatory swiftness and harshly pulled her against him. “You don’t have to like me.” He dug a hand into her hair and held her immobile before him. “You want me.” Julia wanted to hate the way he took her mouth in his as if she belonged to him, but the strength of him was heady. She welcomed his plundering kiss and reveled at how he also lost control. He lifted her and carried her toward the couch.

The intercom on his desk beeped, then his secretary’s voice filled the room. “I’m ready when Julia is. We have a car waiting for us downstairs.”

Gio groaned. “Why does she hate me? Do I not pay her enough?” He let Julia’s feet slide to the ground.

Julia adjusted her clothing and gathered her thoughts. Gio was a strong man and one who was painfully honest, but he wasn't cruel. And he cared about her; she had to believe that. "I'm going out with Rena tonight. She said she had some dresses that might fit me."

"Dresses for a wedding we're not attending?"

Julia put a hand on one hip. "Yes."

"Why borrow from her? I said she could take you shopping." Julia met his eyes angrily and his expression darkened. "Because you don't want anything from me."

In that moment, Julia glimpsed the reason she couldn't stay away from him. However he tried to hide it, she knew he felt things deeply. "I do want something from you, but nothing you could buy."

He had a cornered look in his eyes that reminded her of the stray dog her family had once brought in during a snowstorm when Julia was twelve. The dog had paced and clawed at the door as if he were trapped in the shelter they had offered him. He'd responded to attempts to pet him with defensive snarls. Her mother had suggested that they call the dog warden. They didn't need a dog and certainly not one who might be a danger. Her father had asked them both to give him a month. He said the dog didn't become fearful in a day, and expecting him to trust them that quickly was unrealistic.

Her father had taken a bowl of food and put it on the porch. Before he opened the door to let the dog out, he'd bent and looked into the dog's eyes and said calmly, "You're a good dog, and this can be your home if you want it."

She and her mother had expected the dog to run off into the snow.

Julia smiled as she remembered how her mother had gently teased her husband by asking, "Did he answer you?"

Her gentle giant of a father had merely shrugged and said, "His actions will be his answer."

Rodin, as they'd come to call him, became her father's loyal shadow. He never did sleep in the house, but he met her

father on the porch each morning and went with him to his furniture factory. For her father, he'd allowed the vet to give him annual shots as long as the vet came to the house. When he died, the family had buried Rodin in a plot behind the factory, beneath the tree where he'd always spent the day waiting for her father to finish work so he could walk him home.

Julia wondered what Gio would think of the comparison. The more she got to know him, the more she sensed that he needed shelter from his own storm.

Just as much as he needed someone to believe in him.

He might pretend he didn't care what she thought of him, but she wasn't fooled. *He'll do the right thing.* Julia went up onto her tiptoes and gave him a quick kiss before heading toward the door. She left him standing in the middle of his office shaking his head.

* * *

Gio dropped back into his office chair with a groan. As he always felt after Julia left, Gio felt off balance.

He called his friend Kane and told him that it was time for him to repay him for all the years that Rena had worked for him. He gave Kane Paul's name and information and asked him to hire him. He also explained that Paul might come as a package deal with another man. Both had good work histories with his company, but for personal reasons he preferred they work elsewhere. He called down to Tom and explained the offer to him. Although he refused to hire Paul back, he wanted Julia to be happy.

One woman's opinion shouldn't matter so much to him.

But there was no denying that it did.

His cell phone rang. He checked caller ID and his mood soured more. "Mother," he said coolly.

"George, tell me you're not attending the Andrade wedding on Isola Santos. I'm surprised your uncles have the nerve to invite anyone there." Her dislike of the possibility was clear in her tone.

He almost reassured her he wasn't. Having Julia in his life had brought him a sense of contentment he had decided not to let ancient history threaten. Why look for answers in the past when he had everything he needed right there beside him every night?

Some doors were better left closed.

His mother hadn't hidden her concern when she'd heard he and his brothers had attended a function with the family over the summer, but she'd settled down when nothing came from it.

Patrice Andrade, or, as she was once again known, Patrice Stanfield, daughter of one of the wealthiest oil families in the United States, wasn't known for being an emotional woman. She had even less tolerance for dramatics in others.

Which made her escalating agitation over the wedding difficult to dismiss. It begged the question: *Why?*

Is it the island she hates, or the idea that we may reconcile with our father's family?

He answered vaguely, "I told them I would."

"How could you, Gio? With everything you know?"

"It's a wedding. Nothing more."

"But why are you going? They've invited you to weddings before. You've never gone. Are you hoping things will be different? They won't be. Remember what they've taken from you."

She'd voiced that sentiment a hundred times before. He'd thought himself immune to it, but this time it brought back anger he hadn't known was still within him. "How could I forget with you around to remind me?"

His mother's voice softened. "You're better than them, George. They did you a favor when they showed you how they really felt. You don't need them."

Gio let out a relieved breath. "Is this the only topic you called to discuss? Because I have a meeting waiting for me."

Which was partially true. Somewhere in the world some executive was waiting for him to return his call.

“I saw you in the papers chasing after some woman. Making a fool of yourself in public undermines the company’s image.”

“Good-bye, Mother.”

Just before he hung up, she said, “Watch your brothers on the island, George. Don’t let your uncles manipulate them. They lie as easily as they breathe.”

How many times had they had this very conversation? Looking up at the ceiling in frustration, Gio said, “We’re not little boys anymore. You don’t have to protect us from them.”

“You’re wrong, George. I just hope you realize that before they tear our family apart in a way that even you can’t fix.”

She hung up.

Tear us apart?

I’d say that happened a long time ago.

Her call had changed his mind about seeing his father’s family again, and not in the way his mother had hoped. He was certain now he had to go. He needed to know what awaited him that his mother feared.

But unlike the first time he’d decided to attend the wedding, he didn’t want to bring Julia with him. If the situation got ugly, he wanted her far away from it.

* * *

Rena’s Queen Anne townhouse in Henderson Place had surprised Julia. Even to someone as new to New York as Julia was, the rare cul-de-sac neighborhood implied expensive and exclusive. And if Rena’s designer wardrobe was any indication, the area’s high price hadn’t affected her ability to shop.

Which should have made Julia feel uncomfortable, but Rena had a down-to-earth personality. As she encouraged her to try on dress after dress, Julia felt like she was with her

friends back in Rhode Island preparing for prom. They laughed their way through good and bad fits.

While standing before the mirror in a navy strapless Gucci gown that fit her perfectly, Julia met Rena's eyes in the mirror and asked, "How long have you known Gio?"

Rena smiled and looked up at the ceiling as if counting the years in her head. "I was still in braces when we first met. My brother, Kane, has been his best friend since middle school."

A sliver of uncertainty crept into Julia. "Gio hasn't mentioned him to me, but there is a lot he doesn't tell me."

Rena came to stand beside Julia in front of the mirror. Simply for the fun of it, she was dressed in a whimsical ultrafitted nude gown that boasted not only a bustier but also a long skirt covered in a layer of feathers. She said she'd fallen in love with it when she'd seen it on a runway in London but hadn't yet found an event to wear it to. "Give him time. Gio doesn't trust people easily. He's had good reason not to."

Julia couldn't contain her question. "What happened?"

Rena smiled regretfully. "I wish I could tell you. I'm not supposed to know. He'd kill Kane for telling me."

Changing the subject, Julia looked down at her own dress and said, "Will I need this dress? He said we're not going to the wedding anymore."

"He'll go. He may say he doesn't care about his cousins, but he does. He always has." She took one of Julia's hands in hers. "Take the dress, and don't give up on him. He needs someone like you."

Julia met her own eyes in the mirror.

I want to believe that.

I desperately want to believe that.

Several hours later, Julia followed Gio's driver as he carried the bags of dresses and shoes Rena had loaned her. Although it was still strange having someone always at her side anticipating her needs, she had to admit it was nice.

It still feels like a dream.

Gio opened the door of his apartment and Julia's heart pounded wildly in her chest. His eyes were dark and burning with need for her. *If this is a dream, wake me tomorrow.*

She flew into his arms and met his kiss eagerly. He picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. He sat on the edge of his bed and simply held her for a moment, breathing in the scent of her hair like he'd waited all day to do just that.

She pulled her head back and looked up at him. There was sadness in his eyes that made her want to throw her arms around him and comfort him. "What's wrong?"

"I've decided to attend the wedding this weekend. I leave on Friday morning."

"You leave?"

He put a hand beneath her chin and raised her face up so she would meet his eyes. "You're not coming with me."

Julia clasped her suddenly cold hands in front of her. "Why?" *Because it's over? This can't be how it ends. We haven't even fought.* "You wanted me to go. What's changed?"

He slid her off him and stood. "I no longer want you there."

Confused, Julia stood straight and tall in front of him. "I don't believe you."

"I don't know how to be clearer."

She stepped closer and studied his expression. Questions clamored within her. Insecurities circled like vultures waiting to swoop in. Rena's words came back to her, bolstering her resolve. *Don't give up on him.* "How about just being honest?"

He lashed out verbally. "Dammit, Julia. I'm not taking you to the wedding. I refuse to involve you in this."

Tears clouded Julia's eyes as she saw what was behind his anger. He wanted to protect her. "Okay."

He frowned down at her. "Why aren't you upset?"

Julia's throat clogged with emotion. "Because I'm listening with my heart and not my ears. My father taught me that. It's how he said you see the soul of something. You close out all distractions and you let yourself feel the essence of it." She took him by the hand and led him out of the bedroom to one of the couches in the living room. She sat down even when he continued to stand and glower down at her. "You're angry, but not at me. Let's start over. Yell and rant as much as you want. Let it out. Then we'll talk."

Gio shook his head in bewilderment. "What?"

"Throw something if it makes you feel better. Sometimes I do that. Bottling it up only makes it worse."

"I don't yell."

"Everyone yells."

He shook his head again.

"Then I'll do it for you." She let out a high-pitched angry scream.

He sat beside her. "What are you doing? Stop."

She screamed again.

He covered her mouth. "Someone is going to call the police."

She smiled beneath his hand. He removed it and she said, "I just released all the anger I felt when you told me I couldn't go to the wedding. Now you do it. You'll feel better."

He cocked his head to one side, then started to laugh. He laughed so hard his eyes misted over. And while he did he pulled her into his arms and hugged her.

She nodded with approval. "Laughter works, too. How do you feel?"

He cupped her face between both of his hands and looked down at her, his expression sobering. "Better than I have in a long, long time."

"Do you want to talk now?"

“Hell no.”

Even though she was disappointed, she was relieved to see him smiling. He swung her up and over one of his shoulders. “I just thought of another way to relieve some of my stress.”

She playfully swatted his back. “Don’t think this lets you off the hook. I want to know why you don’t want to take me to the wedding.”

He growled and rolled onto the bed with her. “What’s it going to take for you to stop talking?”

Julia smiled up at him impishly. “Do I really need to tell you?”

She didn’t.

The next hour left her pleasantly unable to speak or even form a coherent thought.

Chapter Sixteen

Julia woke in Gio's arms. Lying naked in his embrace was heaven. He was absently tracing the curve of her lower back.

She hugged him tightly. She wanted to ask him so many questions, but she held her tongue. He would tell her when he was ready. "Gio?"

"Hmmm?" he asked, resting his chin on the top of her head.

"I care about you."

He instantly tensed but said nothing. *What is he afraid I'll say? Who taught him that words of kindness are followed by something unpleasant?*

Rubbing her hand across his lightly haired chest, Julia said, "That's all. I just needed to say it."

He buried his face in her hair and held her for a moment longer, relaxing beneath her touch. "Did you have fun with Rena?"

Julia knew he was trying to distract her and she let him. "Yes. We even looked at some old photographs. I'm so jealous. How did you not have a gangly, awkward stage?"

He chuckled softly and ran his hand through her long hair. "I'm not sure I should let the two of you become friends."

"Too late," Julia said with a mischievous grin. "I love that she's your best friend's little sister. She told me that you and Kane ruled your high school. What was it like being so popular?"

Instead of laughing at her ribbing, his face grew serious. "Kane was my friend. The rest of them were more interested in how much money my family had. That's the problem with money. People don't see you. They see the car you drive. They see the house you live in. Beyond that, none of it is real. When you have enough money, it's no longer a thrill to get more of

it. All that matters is keeping it and ensuring it's there for the next generation.”

Julia held up one of her hands and rubbed her thumb and index finger together back and forth quickly. She stopped and said cheekily, “Do you know what that is? It's the world's smallest violin, and I'm playing it for your very sad story. Too much money. The burden of it. How did you survive?”

He raised his hand and slapped her bare ass with enough force that she jumped, but not enough to hurt her. “I thought you were a sweet woman.”

She smiled back, unrepentant. “I am, but I call bullshit when I see it.”

“That can be a dangerous trait,” he said with a bit more seriousness. “Many people don't like having their reality challenged.”

She propped herself up on one elbow and said, “I'm a lot tougher than you think.”

He ran a gentle hand down one side of her face and down her neck. “Are you?”

“Yes, I am.”

A pained expression twisted his face. “I don't know what the wedding will be like. It has the potential to become an ugly situation.”

Julia leaned forward and rested her head on his chest. “Then you should definitely take me. You shouldn't go to something like that alone.”

He shuddered beneath her, and Julia knew she'd said exactly what he needed to hear.

Chapter Seventeen

It was a few minutes before three on Friday morning when they arrived at the private airfield. “Oh, hell no,” Gio said as his town car pulled onto the tarmac next to his plane and he saw the outline of three men standing next to a stretch limo talking. “I told Rena to hire a second plane for them.”

Julia leaned over him to look out the window. The move tightened the material of her slacks over the curve of her ass in the most tempting way. As adorable as she looked in them, he’d spent the ride over imagining taking them off her in the seclusion of the plane. “Who are they?” she asked.

“My brothers. They’ll have to find their own damn plane.”

“Won’t they think it’s strange that we don’t want them to come with us?”

Gio raised his eyebrows and Julia turned an adorable shade of pink. “I don’t care.”

Julia said softly, “I’d like to meet them.”

Gio swore beneath his breath. He still wasn’t sure how he felt about Julia, but he knew damn well how he felt about sharing a six-hour flight with her and his brothers. He was about to explain to her why his way was the only way when he looked into her blue eyes and lost his resolve. “Nick will probably make a pass at you,” he warned. “Even if I threaten to kill him for it.”

“I’ll laugh it off.”

“Luke will bore you with details of his last surgery.”

Julia turned so she was straddling Gio’s lap, facing him. “I have the perfect game face for boring stories. Watch.” She smiled at him and widened her eyes as if fascinated in what he was saying. “I look them straight in the eye and daydream away. It works every time.”

Gio shook his head, losing the battle against her charm. “I’ll have to remember that expression the next time I’m telling you something.”

“I probably shouldn’t have shared that,” Julia said with a guilty grin, then peered out the window again. “What about your third brother?”

“Max? He’s a wild card. I’m surprised he’s here at all. He’s not big on family events.”

“They sound nice.”

Giving in to the temptation of having her poised above him, he slid his hand between her legs and enjoyed watching her eyes half close with pleasure. “Not as nice as flying over alone would be.”

Julia gave him a deep kiss, then murmured, “How about if I promise to make it up to you on the island? We’ll sneak off somewhere during the reception. There has to be some private corner on it.”

He savored the feel of her lips against his and considered her proposal.

She kissed him quickly and moved playfully away from him. “Unless you’re not interested.”

“Oh, I’m interested.” He reached for her, but before he made contact the door of his town car opened.

Nick greeted them first. He bent to inspect the contents of the vehicle, then straightened and turned to speak to the brothers who stood behind him. “Luke was right. Gio brought a date. So, why couldn’t I bring mine?”

Luke’s sarcasm was thick. “You didn’t know her name.”

“It’s a long flight. We would have figured it out.”

Gio stepped out of the vehicle and faced the trio. He momentarily blocked the door behind him. “I wasn’t aware we were traveling together.”

Luke nodded. “I had Rena cancel our plane. It doesn’t make sense for us to go separately.”

His youngest brother, Max, came over and clapped a hand in greeting on Gio's shoulder. "Don't be cross with Luke. He clings to the possibility of reuniting the family."

Countering his brother, Nick asked, "But not you, Max? Why are you here if you don't care how it turns out?"

Max smiled. "I've run the odds in my head of one of you getting into a serious altercation on the island, and the probability is high."

Luke looked at him and raised one doubtful eyebrow. "And you're coming to make sure that doesn't happen?"

"Hell no, I don't want to miss it," Max said with a wicked grin only the youngest child could master.

Gio let out an audible sigh. "This isn't going to work." He half turned to climb back into his car, but Luke stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Don't go, Gio. I wasn't screwing with you. I think it's important that we arrive together."

Gio looked back and forth between Julia's expectant expression and Luke's earnest one. He put his hand out to Julia, helping her out of the car. "This is Julia Bennett. She was raised in a nice family. Can we be on our best behavior for the next six hours?"

Nick leaned in and whistled appreciatively. "Is she the one who worked in the security department? She is hot. No wonder you broke your rule to date her. But seriously, am I the only one who recognizes a pattern at Cogent? Have you seen the new IT girl? She can fix my laptop anytime."

The group collectively held its breath as Gio's temper rose. His grip on Julia's hand tightened. To his surprise, Julia stepped forward and offered her other hand to Nick. "That's funny. A little inappropriate for the first time you meet me, but flattering if I overlook that last part."

Max laughed out loud. "I am definitely glad I decided to come."

Nick shook Julia's hand, then looked over at Gio. "You finally found a girl with a personality. Hallelujah. Watch out, though. She may give you one. I hear they're catching."

Max laughed again. "Are you going to let him get away with that, Gio?"

The trouble with his decision to cut the darker emotions out of his life was how it had left Gio feeling empty. He wanted to be hopeful like Luke, or laugh along with Max, but he couldn't. He and Nick had something in common. They were both broken in their own way. Instead of rising to Max's bait, Gio looked at his watch and said, "We told them we'd be there for tonight's party. We should get going." He motioned for his driver to put their bags on the plane.

The small Embraer Legacy business jet taxied down the private runway. All five of them sat in one main area, facing each other. Julia was more interested in looking out the window than at the luxurious details of the multimillion dollar aircraft. She took Gio's hand in hers. "I love flying. I haven't visited many places, but the ones I've seen have all been amazing. So flying, to me, means an adventure is beginning. Thank you for letting me come with you."

Her innocent enthusiasm pulled at a part of Gio he'd long considered dead. He leaned down and nuzzled her neck before he realized what he was doing. When he saw Nick's mouth drop open in shock, Gio raised his head and glared at all of his brothers.

After a moment of awkward silence, Luke said, "If you mess this up, Gio, you deserve to grow old alone."

Gio shook his head in denial. "We're not ..." He almost said *serious*, but he looked down into Julia's trusting blue eyes and bit off the rest of his sentence.

I told her I'm not capable of love, but she doesn't believe that, does she?

One of us is wrong.

* * *

Watching the Andrade brothers talk was more fascinating than any in-flight movie could have been. They all had dark hair, near-black eyes, and light olive skin. It was easy to tell they were brothers, but they were also very different. Julia studied each of them intently and listened with her heart.

Gio dressed in a classic style. Although all four were over six feet, Gio was the most intimidating of them. His features were harsher and his face most prone to frowning. He seemed to fill more space on the plane, and when he spoke his tone held a rigid authority. He was a walking ball of tension. Like a soldier asked to stand guard through the night, he never relaxed. *Who are you protecting, Gio? What are you so afraid people will find out?*

Nick had boyish good looks that he cultivated with expensive international flair. He belonged on a cover of GQ, with a drink in one hand, a woman on his arm, and a cocky expression on his face. Still, he shared a sad character trait with Gio: When he smiled, it didn't reach his eyes. *Do you know why Gio isn't happy? Is that what keeps you together but apart?* Every once in a while, Nick would look at Gio with anger burning in his eyes, even as he kept his tone light and joking. *What is it you can't forgive him for?*

Luke was every bit as striking in his good looks as his older brothers, but he dressed to play it down. He wore jeans and a polo shirt. He was the peacemaker of the family. Gio had said he was a doctor, and Julia could see why it was his calling. He listened when his brothers spoke, and his love for them was evident in everything he said to them. He seemed excited about attending the wedding in a way that none of his brothers were. *He doesn't know.*

Max had a bit of all of them in him. He was tough around the edges like Gio. He dressed to impress with expensive clothing tailored to fit him, and every now and then he would poke fun at one of his brothers in a way that was almost playful. Gio had nailed him when he'd called him a wild card. Julia didn't know what his motivation for coming was, but she didn't believe that it was the same as he'd said. He didn't appear to have ill feelings toward any of them. *If he knows,*

he'd never tell. Gio said Max owned and developed casinos around the world. She could see that. *He plays his cards close to his chest.*

None of them mentioned their mother. Having met her, Julia wasn't surprised, but still, she thought it was sad they were heading off to a large family event and not one had suggested she should be there.

Before she thought it through, she asked aloud, "Where's your father?"

All conversation died. Although he didn't look happy about it, Gio bent toward her and explained quietly. "My father passed away years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that. The wedding we're going to is for the son of one of his brothers?"

"Yes, my father was the oldest of three. The youngest of them, Victor Andrade, had one son—Stephan."

"And Maddy?"

Luke jumped in. "Maddy is Uncle Alessandro's daughter. She's married to an amazing French chef. If he offers to cook you anything—I mean anything—just say yes."

"I had the ..." Julia stopped and decided to be less than completely honest, "pleasure of meeting Maddy. She was unexpectedly ... welcoming."

"Maddy is certainly a character." Luke laughed, then grew more serious. "She keeps me up to date with that side of the family. They've had a rough time the last few years. That's one of the reasons she's determined to mend the rift in the family."

Gio released his seat belt and stretched his legs out before him. "Don't build this up into something it isn't, Luke. I, for one, have no intention of seeing any of them again after this weekend."

Nick left his seat to pour himself a Scotch from a crystal decanter.

Max leaned forward and asked, “Weren’t you and Stephan close at one time?”

“No,” Gio answered succinctly. “Nick was. He and Stephan toured the global party circuit together, both believing the tedious idea of working belonged to the generation who had created the family business. Stephan outgrew that phase.”

Nick downed his glass in one shot and poured himself another. “We can’t all be you, Gio. The perfect son. The perfect businessman. Completely lacking in conscience.”

Gio stood slowly, his muscles flexing angrily as he did. “Stop drinking now, Nick, before you make a fool of yourself.”

Nick downed the second glass defiantly. “Or what? What would you do?”

Gio walked over and took the crystal decanter from the counter. As calmly as if he were merely picking up something he’d dropped, he smashed the container on the corner of the bar, then dropped the ragged top to the carpeted floor with the rest of the shattered glass and alcohol. In a controlled, cool voice he said, “Whatever is necessary to protect the family.”

Nick leaned down just as calmly, opened a door of the cabinet, took out another bottle, and placed it next to his glass. “There are at least ten more in there. How many will you break? Which one will convince you what I do is none of your goddamn business?”

Luke was out of his seat and between them. “Nick, enough.”

Nick turned on Luke angrily. “How far would he have to go for you to judge him? If he threw me from the plane, would you justify even that? Or would you finally find the balls to confront him?”

Max leaned over to Julia and said, “Which one do you think would actually get ejected from the plane if it came to that? My money is on Luke. It’s always the one in the cross fire that gets nailed.”

Gio ignored his youngest brother's comment and said, "Go ahead and drink yourself into a stupor, Nick. Make a fool of yourself in front of everyone. Just stay the hell away from me while you do it."

Nick looked over at Julia and opened his mouth to say something more, but Luke took him by the arm and guided him away from the bar to the small kitchen area near the front of the plane. "Come on, let's make coffee. I don't care if you want it, I need some."

Max raised an eyebrow at his oldest brother. "That was extreme, Gio. You couldn't have made your point without making the entire plane smell like a distillery?"

"I went exactly as far as I had to," Gio said coldly. He turned and walked to the other side of the plane where their bags were stored.

Watching the exchange between the brothers was heartbreaking for Julia. She wanted to yell for them to stop, but she sensed they had reached this place many times before. In such a case, it was more important to understand the cause than to treat the symptom. "Are they always like this?"

Max nodded. "I'm actually surprised they made it halfway across the Atlantic before they lost it. And they wonder why I'd rather work on the holidays. Gio and Nick are like oil and water. Or gunpowder and a match. However you describe it, you don't want to stand between them. One day, one of them is going to snap."

"Were they always like that?" Julia asked, watching Gio take his laptop from one of his bags. *He's going to escape to where he is successful—work.*

Max shrugged. "I don't remember them fighting like this before our father died. Maybe they did, and I was too young to see it."

"How did your father die?"

"He was working in Venice. Don't ask me what an oil company CEO needs to do in a sinking city, but that's the story. A heart attack, I think. We don't talk about it. Gio

brought him back to the U.S., buried him, took over the company, and has looked exactly that miserable ever since.”

“Did Nick go with him?” Julia had to ask. She didn’t want to picture Gio collecting his father’s remains alone.

Max watched Gio walking back to sit with them and lowered his voice. “I don’t know.”

Gio returned to his seat and placed his computer on his lap, but he didn’t open it. Julia reached over and took one of his hands in hers, giving it a supportive squeeze. He looked down at her, his eyes dark with suppressed emotions.

The more Julia learned about the man beside her, the more her heart opened to him. Although the four brothers were confined in a small aircraft together, the distance between them was clear. More than anything, she wished she knew how to reach past whatever had separated them.

She looked across at Max and said, “I’m an only child, but I always dreamed of having brothers or sisters. You’re all lucky to have one another.”

Gio’s hand tightened on hers. “You can say that after what you witnessed a few minutes ago?”

Julia looked up at him with her heart in her eyes. “Being part of a family is a messy business, but it’s worth it. A good friend of mine comes from a huge family, and the stories she tells would make your hair curl. Someone is always fighting with someone else. Sometimes the reasons are funny, other times sad. But when one of them is in need, they’re there for each other. I imagine you and your brothers are the same.”

“Gio, you really should have told her more about us. It’s going to be depressing watching her lower her opinion of large families as she gets to know us.” Max stood and walked away to join his brothers, who were sitting around a smaller table near the plane’s galley.

In the quiet following Max’s departure, Julia said, “Gio, your brothers ...”

Gio broke contact with her and opened his laptop. “I don’t want to discuss it,” he said dismissively and started typing as

if Julia no longer sat beside him.

The temptation to slam the laptop closed on his fingers was strong. She was itching to tell him how rude he was being, but there was a hint of something in his expression that made her hold her tongue. He wasn't trying to hurt her; he was hiding. The strong man beside her was lost when it came to overcoming whatever had happened to his family, and he dealt with it by withdrawing.

Julia slid her arm beneath his and hugged it. He looked up from his laptop with a scowl on his face. Still, Julia didn't let go. She held his eyes and continued to hug his arm to her. *You don't fool me, Gio. I know you're upset. I'm here if you need me.*

His expression softened. He leaned over and kissed her forehead, then seemed as surprised by his action as she was. He cleared his throat and said, "You should try to sleep. It'll be a long day if you don't."

She hid a smile and laid her head on his shoulder. She didn't know what the trip held for either of them, but in that moment, she was glad she'd agreed to go.

* * *

The even rhythm of Julia's breath as she slept was calming. Gio placed his laptop on the floor beside him and closed his eyes. Nothing about Julia made sense. Every time she spoke he was reminded of how very different they were. At first, he'd thought he was drawn to her for purely sexual reasons. But having her curled up against him, supporting him even without fully understanding the situation, filled him with a warm feeling he couldn't deny.

Part of him wanted to push her away and list the reasons they didn't belong together. Part of him wanted to hold her close and tell her that nothing in his life had ever felt so right.

I don't want this.

Any of this.

Not her.

Not a weekend with relatives.

None of this.

Life is better when it's uncomplicated.

In control.

The exact opposite of how it had been for him since he'd met Julia.

He turned his head and looked down at her sleeping profile. His breath caught in his throat. *I shouldn't have brought her. I need a clear head to navigate the weekend.*

His three brothers returned to their seats across from him. Luke handed him a cup of steaming black coffee. He accepted it with a nod.

With Julia asleep at his side, he sipped his coffee and studied his brothers. Neither Nick nor Max would meet his eyes. Luke gave him a sympathetic smile.

What did Julia say about family? It's messy?

What are they waiting for me to say?

Whatever I say will be wrong.

It always is.

He glanced down at Julia again. *What would she do if our situations were reversed? She'd blurt out an apology. She wouldn't dress it up with excuses or worry about the possible backlash. She'd dive right in.*

Gio looked across at Nick and said, "I went too far earlier. What you do is your business."

Nick propped an ankle on top of his knee, leaned back, and asked nonchalantly, "Are you actually apologizing?"

Gio straightened, inadvertently waking Julia. She sat up, rubbed her eyes, and looked back and forth between them as if trying to remember where she was. She smiled up at Gio and—he couldn't help it—he smiled back.

Luke raised a hand to catch the attention of the flight attendant. "Julia, would you like a coffee?"

She shook her head. “Maybe a snack, though?”

Luke called the attendant over. Julia and all four brothers put in a request for a light fare of sandwiches and finger foods.

In the quiet after the attendant’s departure, Julia asked, “How much longer until we arrive?”

Gio checked his watch. “Two hours at the most.”

“Do you want to watch a movie?” Julia asked.

There was a unanimous shake of heads.

“Play a game?” she asked cheerfully.

Although Gio shook his head, Max leaned forward in his seat. “What kind of game?”

Luke pointed a thumb at his younger brother with a knowing smile. “Max is a professional gambler, so don’t make it poker. We gave up trying to beat him back when all we had to lose was our allowance.”

Julia’s eyes rounded. “A professional gambler? What an interesting job.”

Max shrugged. “It is. Everything in life is a gamble. For a while I lived solely off my poker winnings. However, now I build casinos around the world. So, Gio can finally admit to knowing me again.”

Gio tensed at Max’s comment. “Your profession never bothered me.”

“Really?” Max asked, unconvinced.

Nick said in mock sympathy, “Don’t feel bad, Max. He’s ashamed of all of us.”

Luke interjected, “Nick, can we make it to the island without another scene?”

Normally, Gio would have ended the conversation before it went further. He regularly told himself he didn’t care what others thought, but this time he didn’t lie to himself. “I’m proud of all of my brothers,” Gio said, more harshly than he’d intended.

“Even me?” Nick pushed.

Gio answered without hesitation. “I may not agree with the choices you’ve made lately, Nick, but I understand why you make them.”

Nothing in his life matched the rush of emotion he felt in response to Julia’s light squeeze of his arm in approval.

Nick opened his mouth to say something, then closed it with a snap. Max looked like he wanted to say something more but decided against it.

Luke clapped his hands and said, “So, how about that game, Julia?”

She turned shyly to Gio. “It was a silly idea. We don’t have to.”

Although he usually viewed games as a waste of time, time was exactly what they had to fill, and he’d take anything that would distract from more excruciatingly awkward conversations. “We could use a game about now. What did you have in mind?”

Julia reached down into her bag and took out a small pile of index cards. “Rena thought I should know who I’m going to meet on the island. She made these index cards for me. One side has a name written on it. The other side has clues on how to recognize that person. We could see who is best at guessing the person from the description.”

Cocking his head to the side, Luke asked, “Rena did that for you? Interesting.”

Julia held the stack of cards to her chest for a moment. “She thinks I might be able to make a connection at the wedding.”

Nick looked at Max and shrugged. “Okay, I’ll bite. A connection for what?”

Julia instinctively brought a hand to her necklace, and she flashed a brave smile at Gio’s three brothers. “I moved to New York to try to sell my jewelry designs. So far, nothing, but I’m not giving up. I’m hoping to find an investor.”

Nick nodded toward Gio. "I'd say you've already met one."

Julia winked at Gio and said, "No, I'm just with him for the sex."

Max choked on the sip of coffee he'd just taken. Nick's mouth fell open, and Luke shook his head.

Gio's eyes flew to Julia's in surprise.

Julia burst into laughter. "You should see your faces. No wonder you fight so much. You're all way too serious." She composed herself, folded her hands in mock contriteness, and said with just a trace of humor, "Even my dad would have laughed at that joke."

Gio looked down at Julia, half coughed, then chuckled.

Julia's eyes were brimming with laughter, threatening to erupt again. She waved her hands in a plea for him to stop. "Don't laugh, Gio, because I shouldn't when I'm still trying to make a good impression."

"You have," Max said and joined in their laughter. "I didn't think anything could shock Nick, but I believe he's speechless."

Nick said, "I'm just trying to figure out how Gio ended up with a woman who is actually fun."

Julia smiled. "I may have scrambled his brains the first time I met him. I hit him with that lamp pretty hard."

Luke said, "I believe it was physicist Joseph Henry who said, Great discoveries only take root in minds well prepared to receive them. He needed some scrambling."

"Funny, Luke," Gio said gruffly, raising a hand to his temple as he remembered that blow. "It could have killed me."

Conversation was halted while the attendant set trays of food on a table between them. Once by themselves again, Max said, "I want to know why you hit him with a lamp."

Julia blushed. "I thought he was breaking into Rena's desk ..." As she retold the story, Gio noticed his brothers were genuinely interested, and relaxing for the first time since

they'd entered the plane. Julia had a gift when it came to breaking down barriers. As they joked together, Gio was reminded of how he and his brothers had interacted when they were younger. Julia had given him a glimpse of the past, and he wasn't sure what to do with the way it made him feel.

The next two hours flew by. Conversation flowed easily, and Julia kept the mood light by periodically reading a new index card to the group. They took turns using the small bedroom in the back of the plane as a dressing room, slowly transforming from casual to party-ready.

When Julia returned to the main part of the plane dressed in a floor-length navy gown, Gio couldn't take his eyes off her. She'd styled her hair in a loose bun that made a man want to reach out and release those barely contained curls. The dress fit her snugly and emphasized her curves so deliciously that had they been alone she wouldn't have kept it on for long.

She caught him looking at her, and the smile she gave him knocked what was left of his sanity out of him. In that instant, he didn't care about anything but having her again. By the way a blush spread up her cheeks, he knew she'd guessed his thoughts.

The pilot's voice interrupted and requested everyone fasten their seat belts for the final approach to Isola Santos.

Gio tensed instinctively as he was slammed back into reality. He looked out the side window and caught his first glimpse of the island. The enormous glass-and-chrome building Dominic Corisi had built still dominated a good fourth of the island. The sight of it made him angrier than he'd expected it to.

Julia was also looking out the window. She turned and asked, "That's the island? Wow, that is quite a compound. Did your family build that?"

"No," Gio said, hearing the disgust in his own voice. He leaned over her, and as the plane circled before landing, he pointed to a much smaller, stone mansion on the other side of the island. "That's the Andrade mansion."

Luke looked out the window beside him. “It’s been in the family for hundreds of years.”

Julia innocently continued on with a painful line of questioning. “So, what is the large glass compound? Are they leasing land to a university or something?”

Max looked at Gio cautiously. “Uncle Victor sold the island when he hit financial difficulties. The new owner built that glass shrine to himself.”

“Mother offered to buy the island, but Dominic Corisi outbid us,” Gio said bitterly.

“Your mother?” Julia asked, then looked as if she regretted saying it out loud.

“Surprised that we have one?”

“No,” Julia said, wide-eyed. “Of course you have a mother. I’m sure she’s very nice, too. She couldn’t make it today?”

Max was the first to answer. “She never got along with our uncles. She came from old money and our father came from ... let’s just say ... less-refined stock.”

Nick defended his father’s family. “The Andrades had money. Perhaps not at the Stanfield level, but enough that they summered on their private island each year. And this generation has more than made up for whatever they didn’t have before.”

Julia interjected, “So, we’re not talking about the completely unacceptable type who would have to work year round. Thank God.”

All four brothers turned to look at her. Julia merely raised her eyebrows and waited. Luke laughed and turned to Gio. “I do believe your girlfriend is just what this family needs.”

Julia gave them each a cheeky smile that removed the sting from her words. “Just calling it like I see it.”

Gio watched his brothers melt before her charm. *I keep telling myself what Julia and I have is nothing more than a physical attraction. She doesn’t belong here. But what if I’m wrong?*

His stomach twisted painfully at the thought.

Blissfully unaware, Julia looked out the window again and said, “So, the new owner is letting your cousin get married on your old island. That’s nice.”

Max shook his head. “Stephan is marrying the sister of the man who bought the island. Corisi intends to return the island to Stephan as a wedding present. So, it looks like it’s back in the family.”

“Not *our* family,” Gio said harshly. He regretted voicing those words as soon as they were out. In a heartbeat his brothers’ expressions closed, and tension once again crackled in the air. Julia reached out and took his hand in hers.

The tires of the plane touched and bounced on the island runway.

After descending the stairs, he paused. Julia’s eyes were round with wonder as she took in the manicured grounds, the visible security everywhere, and the party that was spilling out of the glass building and onto the lawn in front of it. In the middle of a group of adults, dressed in formal gowns and tuxedos, children chased each other, their laughter ringing out above the music of a live band.

The level of joy bubbling out of the house filled Gio with intense and conflicting emotions, holding him immobile even as his brothers began walking toward the house.

Julia tugged on his hand until he looked down at her again. She went up on her tiptoes and whispered, “What are you thinking?”

He studied the monstrosity of glass and chrome with disgust. “Only someone with a complete lack of appreciation for the beauty and history of the island would have built such an atrocity.” He shared his thoughts aloud. “I want to throw a hundred rocks through those glass windows.”

Julia made a funny grimace. “That wouldn’t be my first choice of how to start the evening.”

His breath came quicker as adrenaline rushed through his veins. He smiled down at her. “I’m angry. Furious, in fact. I

haven't felt like this in years."

Julia's eyes widened again. "And that's a good thing?"

He tried to find the words to explain it but couldn't. "Yes, I believe it is." He'd held it in so long it had made him numb to everything else. Suddenly, he felt more alive than he had in years. Like he could finally breathe.

"Come on." Instead of heading toward the party, he led Julia toward a path leading to the other side of the island.

"Where are we going?" Julia asked as she lengthened her strides to keep up with him.

"There's something I want to show you."

The island was small enough that she didn't have to wonder about their destination for long. A ten-minute brisk walk brought them to the steps of the building he thought he'd never see again. "This was my father's house."

"Is it locked?" she asked.

He lifted a pulled a loose stone from the foundation of the house, took out a key, and said, "Not for long."

"Are you sure we can go inside?"

He spared her a quick look before swinging the door open. The home's classic Mediterranean style gave it a timeless quality. Its white walls, accented with intricate tile work, could easily have been the result of a renovation, but they were original to the home.

Gio led Julia down the hall, into what had once been the study. What little furniture remained in the room was covered with white cloths, making the room seem abandoned and oddly preserved at the same time. He stood there, feeling as if he had one foot in the present and one in the past. "I always thought this house would one day belong to me. It has been passed down from the oldest son to the oldest son for generations." He walked over to the mantel of a large fireplace and ran his hand across the dusty marble. "When my father died and it didn't come to me, I was furious. The sale of it was a final slap in the face." He walked to a bookcase and took

down a book that had been left behind. “I was twenty-five. I’d been struggling for a year to fill my father’s shoes at Cogent. I didn’t confront my uncles. Instead, I put all my energy into what I could change, and that was the profitability of my family’s company.” He turned to Julia and said, “I should have fought for this place. I should have made it mine.”

Their eyes met and Julia’s heart thudded in her chest. She shook her head. He was finally opening up to her. She wanted to tell him how much it meant to her, but she knew he needed to be left uninterrupted.

He left her side to search the remaining items on the surrounding shelves. He ran a hand over the molding.

“What are you looking for?” Julia couldn’t contain her curiosity.

“Something that probably isn’t here,” Gio said as he continued pulling old books from the shelves and flipping through them.

“What?”

He walked to where a desk had once been and looked around the room. “The truth.”

Julia followed Gio out of the library and into each of the downstairs rooms. Not much had been left behind. Every item of value must have been removed before the sale.

Gio flipped a switch in one of the closets, but the area remained dark. Not that there was anything inside to be illuminated. Speaking more to himself than to her, Gio said, “The two houses must run on separate generators.” He ran his hand along the intricate wood paneling, absently caressing the house. “I remember reading an interview with Corisi after he bought the island. He planned to knock this house down. He considered it old ruins.”

Gio walked back into the main hall, and Julia followed him. She knew Gio was far away in his thoughts, and that was okay with her. *What did he mean when he said he was looking for the truth?*

They walked up one side of a double curved stairway that led off the foyer. At the top, Julia let herself imagine filling the space below with people and laughter. “This must have been an incredible place to entertain.”

“It has ten bedrooms. When I was a child, they were always full. My father said it was the same when he was young. Andrades have been born here. Some have even died here. My grandfather passed away in his sleep right here in the house, surrounded by his family.”

“I can see why you wouldn’t want it to be knocked down.” Julia could only imagine Gio’s bond to the house. The home and factory she was fighting for had only been in their family for one generation. To lose something that was so linked to your family’s history must have been devastating. “Did your mother also love this place?” It was hard for Julia to imagine her letting it go if she had.

“My mother refused to step inside it.”

Interesting.

Gio walked ahead of her into one of the rooms. She lingered in the upper hallway, running her hand along the areas where slightly darker patches of wallpaper revealed where paintings had once hung. *Family paintings? Famous Italian artists? What would they have displayed?*

What could anyone hate about this beautiful house?

Was it because Gio’s grandfather died here?

Julia turned from the wall, realizing she had no idea where Gio had gone. She hugged herself as a sudden chill went up her back.

It would take more than that to keep me away.

Ghosts aren’t real.

I mean, not the ones that move things around and scare people.

Her father would have argued that the universe was full of an infinite number of things the human mind could not comprehend. Julia smiled as she remembered her mother’s

rebuttal to that theory. “Show me the proof. Things fall. Lights flicker. To me, that’s not evidence of a ghost. Is every spirit a klutz that can only make a mess? You want me to believe in one? Show me a ghost that washes dishes or folds my laundry. Then I’ll believe.”

She has a point, Grandpa Andrade. If you’re here, do something useful and help Gio find whatever it is he’s looking for.

Julia’s cell phone rang in her purse and she screamed. She scrambled to take it out, dropped it, picked it back up, then screamed again when it rang in her hands.

I am such an idiot.

Caller ID showed a blocked number.

She hesitated, then laughed again as it continued to ring. *What do I think, this is a call from the other side? More likely it’s a telemarketer trying to sell me a place in Italy because some cookie I downloaded is announcing my location.*

Julia gave herself a mental shake and answered her phone. “Hello?”

“I’m disappointed in you, Julia.”

Another chill went down Julia’s back. *Worse than a specter ...* “Mrs. Andrade, what a ... surprise ... to hear from you.”

Her hand went protectively to her throat. Although she had done nothing wrong, Julia spun to make sure she was still alone and almost screamed again when she saw Gio standing just behind her. She covered her mouth with one hand.

Mountain climbers shouldn’t be afraid of heights.

And women who run halfway around the world with men they recently met shouldn’t be so jumpy. *Be calm. Sophisticated. I’ve got this.*

He nodded toward the phone and mouthed, “Who is that?”

Julia froze. *Say something. Don’t just stare at him.* Her mind raced for a lie or an explanation, but none came. She

held the phone out awkwardly, completely at a loss for what to say.

Gio took it and pressed the speakerphone button.

No.

“Are you alone?” his mother asked.

Gio’s eyes narrowed as he recognized his mother’s voice. He looked to Julia for an explanation, but all she could do was shrug. *This isn’t good. His mother already doesn’t like me. I’m pretty sure this won’t help.* She made a grab for her phone, but Gio held it just out of her reach. She pleaded with her eyes for him to give her the phone, but he nodded for her to answer his mother.

“Are you daft, girl? It’s an easy yes or no question.”

Gio held her eyes, willing her to do the unthinkable. *This isn’t right. But what she said to me back in New York wasn’t right, either. Maybe he has the right to know what his mother is up to.* “Yes, I’m alone.”

In a cutting tone she said, “I tried to be nice to you, Julia. You should have taken my offer. A smart girl would have. Now you’ll come back to nothing. After I tell Gio about you, he won’t give you the time of day.”

A deep frown settled over Gio’s expression. His eyes were cold and unreadable. Barely above a whisper, Julia said, “There’s nothing to tell.”

“The truth is what I say it is. He won’t believe you over me.”

A deep fury contorted Gio’s features. “I wouldn’t be so sure of that, Mother.”

“Gio.” Her voice jumped an octave as she said his name. Then it quickly became conciliatory. “I’m trying to protect you, that’s all. It’s obvious this girl is only after our money.”

“What’s obvious is that I can no longer believe anything you tell me,” Gio said coldly and hung up.

Julia hugged her stomach. Although a small part of her felt his mother had earned whatever grief her actions had brought her, the scene she'd just witnessed broke her heart. Her love for her own mother, and her sadness as the woman who had raised her so well slipped away, made her want to shake both of them. *Call her back. Tell her you love her. Give her a chance to apologize.*

Gio stared down at the phone. His hand tightened on it until the case cracked from the pressure. He threw the broken phone over the banister in disgust.

“Oh,” Julia exclaimed involuntarily as she grabbed for it.

He looked back at her.

Julia watched the phone bounce once, then shatter on the floor below. *I did tell him that throwing things was a good way to express anger. I just didn't know he'd start with my stuff.* “It's fine. I mean, who would I need to call anyway, right?”

“I'll get you another phone.”

Julia looked over her shoulder at him. “It's not a big deal.”

“I said I'd replace it.”

“Do what you want to do. That's what you do anyway.”

“Are we actually arguing about your damn phone?”

Julia clung to the railing with both hands. Watching him fight with his mother had made her angry. And feel as helpless as she felt each time she spoke with her own mother. But Gio's mother wasn't sick. They didn't have to do this to each other. They still had time, if they chose to work things out. “Yes, because it didn't have to happen like this. You should have given the phone back to me when I asked for it.”

“And when she came to me with lies about you? What then?”

“Maybe she wouldn't have.” When Gio looked at her doubtfully, Julia threw her hands up in the air. “I don't have all the answers, but I do know that life is short and cruel. If you love her at all, figure out why she's angry. Appreciate that you have something not everyone does—time to fix things. Do you

know what I'd give to have my mother fully back with me for even one day? I'd give anything to sit down with her and know she knew me. And not because my father told her who I was, but because she actually remembered me and our lives together." Julia stopped and wiped a tear from her cheek. She hadn't intended to say any of that. "I'm sorry."

He pulled her to him and simply hugged her. "Don't be." He rested his chin on her forehead. After a moment he asked, "What did she mean when she said you should have accepted her offer?"

"Does it matter?" she hedged.

"Yes."

"Why? The details won't change what you know."

"Julia." He said her name in a tone that meant he wasn't giving up until she told him everything.

Julia closed her eyes and said, "She offered me two hundred thousand dollars if I went back to Rhode Island instead of coming to the wedding with you."

He held her back from him and searched her face. "The exact amount you need to save your father's business."

"Yes," Julia said hoarsely. There was a look in his eyes she'd seen before. It filled her with a warmth she fought against.

Don't start imagining he's falling in love.

Don't do that to yourself.

"But you didn't take it," he said softly.

Her breath caught in her throat. "I promised I'd come here with you."

With a groan, he lowered his mouth to hers. He kissed the curve of her neck. He raised his head, his eyes full of desire. For a moment she thought he was going to say something, then his mouth descended on hers, claiming it with an intensity that had her sagging against him with pleasure. His tongue was hot and demanding, encircling hers possessively. His hands

sought the zipper of her gown. Their kiss paused just long enough for him to undo it. He held the dress as she stepped out of it, then dropped it over the banister.

He impatiently slid her underwear off and sent them floating down to the foyer below. His mouth was caressing her everywhere: her neck, her shoulders, tickling behind her ear. He lifted her, naked, and balanced her on the banister.

She clutched at his shoulders, out of passion and also a twinge of fear. Until now, she would have said that the most daring place she'd ever had sex was on a secluded beach. Danger heightened the intensity of the experience. She unbuttoned the front of his shirt, desperate to feel more of him.

There was something about being held by him, trusting him to protect her, meeting him in this very physical sense, that brought their lovemaking to an entirely new level. She gave herself to him in that moment. Completely. And she knew she would never want or trust another man as much as she did Gio.

With one arm supporting her back, he slid a hand up her thigh. She shuddered in anticipation. He gently caressed the inside of each of her thighs. Teasing her. She wanted to feel his fingers on her, in her. Helpless before him, dripping wet with need, she whimpered.

He raised his head and looked down into her eyes. "Do you know what you do to me?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head, unable to speak.

"It has never been like this with anyone else."

His hand slid over the outside of her wet folds. One finger slid between them and began to rub her clit with a rhythm that had her writhing against him, no longer caring about the floor far below. All that mattered was his touch and how it made her feel.

"Say you're mine, Julia. Tell me nothing else matters. It's just you and me and this."

He thrust a finger deep inside her and she cried out with pleasure. In that moment, she almost said she loved him, but she knew that wasn't what he wanted to hear. He was taking

possession of her body on the most primal level, and he wanted to know she gave it to him willingly.

“I’m yours, Gio.”

He lifted her and she wrapped her legs around his waist. With his hands on her waist, he turned and took a few long strides until she felt a solid wall against her back. He unbuckled his belt and opened the front of his trousers, then braced her against the wall as he deftly opened a foil wrapper and sheathed himself. His tip teased at the opening of her wet center.

He kissed her deeply while he thrust inside her. She gasped into his mouth. This was no controlled lovemaking. His hands bit into her waist as he held her and pounded again and again. There was pleasure and pain—mixing and building within her with this wild mating. She spread her legs wider for him.

As she spiraled toward an orgasm.

Heat spread through her. She was beyond the ability to speak.

He shuddered against her as he came inside her. They held each other, breathing raggedly. Still inside her, he groaned. “I can’t get enough of you.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Julia asked. *Because I feel the same.*

He slid her slowly to the ground and stepped back. “It is when I know how wrong I am for you.”

They both froze at the sound of the front door opening below. A female voice asked, “Do you think they’re inside?” *Maddy.*

Julia looked into Gio’s eyes and held back a nervous giggle. He adjusted his pants, picked his shirt off the floor, and offered it to her. She slipped it on, grateful that it hung down almost to her knees.

A male voice answered her. “I doubt it. Gio swore he’d never return here.” *Luke.*

“People can change. You didn’t think he’d ever accept the invitation.”

“I was wrong. Looks like I’m wrong again. He’s here.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because those are Julia’s clothes.”

Julia covered her mouth to stop the audible gasp that escaped her. She took a step back against the wall.

“Oh,” Maddy said. Then said again, with more emphasis, “*Oh.*”

Julia covered her face with her hands in mortification. Gio pulled her back into his arms and kissed her forehead.

In a louder voice, Maddy said, “If you two can hear me, I’m really glad you came. We’re going back now, but I was worried when you didn’t come in with the others. I wanted to make sure you were okay.” She laughed. “It looks like you are. So, come on over to the rehearsal dinner when you’re ready.”

Luke said, “Julia, have I mentioned how good you are for my brother? Don’t let him scare you off.”

Julia held her breath until she heard the door close behind them. Then joked, “Well, I’ve hit a new level of embarrassment.”

Gio looked angry again, and Julia was sorry she’d spoken aloud. She laid one of her hands softly on one of his cheeks. “I don’t care what they think of me, Gio.”

Face tight, eyes burning with an emotion she couldn’t decipher, he growled, “I do. You deserve better than this. Better than me.”

She smiled up at him, wishing she knew what to say to remove some of the sadness in his tone. “I don’t know about that, but I do deserve some of the hors d’oeuvres I saw them serving. I’m starving.”

“After everything, you still want to go?”

She searched his eyes for a moment. “I don’t care about the party. Or the wedding. I care about you. We can leave now if you want, or we can go in there and meet every last damn relative you have. What do you want to do?”

He hugged her to him. “What the hell is someone as nice as you doing with a man like me?”

“You’re not nearly as awful as you think you are, Gio.”

He shook his head and took her hand, leading her down the stairs toward her clothing. “You don’t know me.”

She stopped halfway down the stairs. He turned two stairs below her, which brought them eye to eye. “But I want to.”

He nodded and started leading her across the foyer toward the door.

Julia, still clad only in his shirt, pulled him to a stop. “I should probably get my dress first.”

He looked down at her and a lusty smile spread across his face. “And I’ll need my shirt back.”

She laughed up at him. “We’re already late.”

He kissed the line of her jaw and whispered in her ear, “Then it won’t matter, will it?”

Chapter Eighteen

The sun was dipping over the horizon the second time Gio and Julia approached the large glass mansion. This time Gio didn't hesitate. Holding Julia's hand, he walked straight across the lawn, up the stairs, and through the large glass doors. An older man crossed to meet them as soon as they entered.

"Gio, it's good to see you again."

Gio didn't return the compliment. He merely nodded and said, "Julia, this is my uncle, Alessandro."

His uncle smiled warmly and winked at her. "The Andrades have always had good taste in women." He looked over his shoulder and waved for his wife to join them. "My own wife is as beautiful today as she was the day I met her. Elise, come meet Gio's date. Imagine the babies these two would make."

Elise rushed forward and swatted at her husband. "Don't mind him. Ever since Maddy gave us a grandchild he has baby on the brain." She gave Julia a kiss of welcome on both cheeks.

Looking playfully affronted, Alessandro covered his wounded heart with one hand. "Theirs would not be any baby. With my brother gone, Gio is like a son to me. His children would be my grandchildren as much as mine are."

Julia felt Gio tense beside her and she quickly intervened. "I noticed there is quite a large group here already. Are they all staying in the main house?"

Alessandro looked puzzled by her question, then answered, "Oh, yes, there are plenty of rooms. Or were you asking about the mansion? We didn't open it for this event. It's empty anyway. I don't know if the generator would work after all this time. I'd have to ask Dominic if anyone has maintained it since he's owned it. Honestly, I don't have the heart to go see it. Perhaps after Stephan renovates it I will feel differently. It will be nice to have it back in the family."

Gio's hand tightened painfully on Julia's arm. Julia glanced up and cringed at the burning fury she saw in his eyes. Alessandro saw it, too, and a line of concern formed on his forehead.

Elise's light tone revealed that she had missed the building tension. "I looked for both of you when your brothers arrived, but they said you went for a walk. I can understand wanting to after such a long flight. We're so happy to have you here. Come, let me introduce you to some of your cousins who were not able to make it to New York this summer."

Julia whispered as they walked. "You're hurting my arm, Gio."

He looked down and instantly released her. "Sorry. I wasn't aware ..."

She took his hand in hers and gave it a supportive squeeze. "I know." His features were set in harsh lines.

As she and Gio followed Alessandro, Julia felt like she'd stepped into a movie. The men were handsomely attired in tuxedos that screamed of money and power. The women were dressed in floor-length gowns and dripping with diamonds. Julia fingered the prototype necklace she'd worn. The metal was copper instead of gold. The stones were faux.

Did I really think I could network here? Which one of these women would spare a second look at my costume jewelry when they're wearing enough diamonds to buy and sell a small country?

Julia recognized Nicole from across the room. She was exquisitely dressed in a flowing powder-blue Prada gown and looked perfectly at home amidst the somewhat gaudy display of wealth. After Rena's informative crash course in the wedding guests, Julia understood why. Nicole had been raised in this world, and her brother was one of the top ten wealthiest men in the world.

Nicole caught Julia watching her and said something to the tall blond man beside her. The man, who had to be Stephan

Andrade, looked up and nodded to his fiancée, and they both started walking across the large foyer toward them.

Alessandro hugged Nicole to his side and turned to introduce her to Julia. “Nicole, have you met Gio’s girlfriend?”

If possible, Nicole’s smile grew wider at the label. She leaned in and kissed Julia’s cheeks in greeting. “Yes, I have. Welcome, Julia. I’m so pleased you could make it.”

Stephan shook Gio’s hand. “Thank you for coming.”

“You can thank Madison. She was ... persuasive,” Gio said with some irony.

Stephan laughed. “That’s being kind. Maddy is too used to getting her way. She means well, though. And it’s impossible for any of us to stay upset with her, so I suppose it’s our fault she has boundary issues.” More seriously, he added, “Whatever brought you, it means a lot to me that you came. Nothing is more important than family.”

Alessandro smacked Gio on the shoulder. “It’s good to have all of us together again.”

Gio made a sound deep in his chest, and Julia tugged on his hand. He looked down at her, and she did her best to send him a telepathic message. *Behave. They love you.* Julia turned her attention to Nicole and said, “You must be out-of-your-mind excited. What a beautiful location for a wedding. I saw tents going up on the far lawn. Is that where the ceremony will be?”

Nicole said, “That’s where the reception will be. For the ceremony, we’re doing something outside.” She smiled dreamily up at her fiancé. “There is a hill about halfway between this house and the old Andrade mansion. At the very top of it, you can see both clearly. There isn’t room for chairs at the top, but the symbolism of two families coming together through our union is worth having everyone stand for the short time we’ll be there.” She looked across at Julia shyly. “That probably sounds corny.”

Julia shook her head. “Not at all. It’s a beautiful idea.”

Innocently, Nicole said, “You and Gio should take a walk over tomorrow and see the old house. It’s lovely.”

“It really is,” Julia agreed spontaneously, then blushed. *I did not mean to say that.*

Stephan looked at Gio curiously. “You went over to see the old place? I didn’t realize you had any interest in it.”

Face tight, Gio said, “It was part of my childhood as much as yours.”

Stephan nodded slowly, then glanced at his uncle with a curious expression. Alessandro shook his head tersely in a move that clearly meant, Drop the subject.

Nicole gave the room a quick scan. “I have to tell Maddy you’re here, Julia. I wonder where she went.”

“She knows,” Julia said, then covered her traitorous mouth with one hand. *Thank God I’m not a spy. I’d fail miserably at it.*

Nicole’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Really? She didn’t say anything. That little stinker. Usually she tells me everything.”

Hopefully not everything. Julia bit her lip beneath her hand.

“There’s Abby,” Nicole exclaimed with excitement and waved her over.

A beautiful brunette walked over with a tall dark-haired man. The crowd parted for them in a way they hadn’t even for the bride- and groom-to-be. Abby and Dominic Corisi: the new American royal family. Even Julia found them easy to recognize. Their whirlwind romance and wedding had been highly publicized, and their new daughter was on the cover of every gossip magazine at the grocery store. The billionaire, and the middle-school teacher who had won his heart. What was not to love about their story?

Starstruck, Julia watched the beautiful couple and sighed audibly.

Dominic greeted Gio with a handshake. “Good to see you again.”

Abby shook Gio's hand warmly, then looked from Julia to Nicole.

A mischievous smile spread across Nicole's face as she pointed at Julia. "This is *Julia*. She came with Gio."

Abby's face brightened with unexpected recognition. "*The Julia?*"

Gio tensed beside Julia. "Excuse me?"

Dominic hugged his wife to his side and said with some humor, "You don't want to know."

Suddenly not looking very happy, Gio looked down at Julia suspiciously.

Abby noticed and blushed. "Wow, I have been hanging out with my sister too much."

Stephan looked back and forth between the two. "Is this about the bet?"

Nicole glared up at him and said, "No." He looked about to say something else, but Nicole quickly said, "Don't ruin it."

Alessandro let out a hearty laugh. "Gio, now that you're back you'll have to get used to the women plotting against us. Don't worry about it. It's always harmless. And if you ask Maddy, she'll tell you everything. She's the weak link."

Nicole whispered something to Abby.

Julia joked to Alessandro, "That may change after those two talk to her."

The older man bent his tall frame and gave Julia the saddest puppy-dog expression she'd ever seen on a grown man. "Could you resist your father if he looked at you like this?" Alessandro turned his head more to the side, focused his eyes on the floor then, slowly raised them to meet Julia's, silently pleading.

Julia burst out laughing. "You've got me. I would tell you everything."

Straightening and puffing with pride, Alessandro rewarded Julia with a pleased smile. "It's all in the eyes."

Nicole chastised him playfully. “Uncle Alessandro. You’re shameless.”

He shrugged, clearly not bothered by her teasing. He waved to someone across the room and said, “If you’ll all excuse me. I was going to introduce Gio and Julia around, but it looks like that’s not necessary.” Before he walked away he said, “It is good to have you here, Gio.”

A woman came by and motioned for Nicole to follow her. Nicole said, “The photographer would like to take pictures of the wedding party now.” She smiled at Julia. “We’ll talk later.”

Stephan nodded to Gio and followed Nicole into one of the side rooms. Abby and Dominic excused themselves and did the same.

Gio took Julia by the arm and guided her in the opposite direction. “I didn’t realize I had brought *the* Julia to the wedding. Do you know what they meant?”

Not one to lie, Julia answered honestly. “Not entirely. I think the women are hoping that you’ll settle down, get married, and become close to this side of the family again.”

“What does that have to do with you?”

Julia took a deep breath. *I’m sure he didn’t mean that the way it sounded. Still, let’s see if this takes some wind out of his sail.* “They seem to think the right woman can bring a man back from even the darkest place.”

Instead of countering her comment or brushing it off, Gio mulled it for a moment before saying, “And what do you think?”

Mouth dry, Julia said, “I suppose it depends on the man and if he wants to come back.”

He pulled her into a secluded corner, his eyes dark with emotion. “People don’t change.”

Julia put a hand on his chest, just above his heart. “What a sad world it would be if that were true.”

He kissed her forehead. “You are one amazing woman, Julia. I wish ...”

She covered his mouth with her hand. “Sometimes less is more. I am happy with amazing.”

* * *

As Gio guided Julia through the party, it was easy to forget why he’d come. A constant stream of family members came over to greet them. Many of them he’d lost touch with. Some he was meeting for the first time. Although his father was one of three sons, the generation before theirs had been larger. First, second, third generation—the level of separation wasn’t mentioned. About half the people in the room called themselves his cousin.

Random children he didn’t recognize ran up and down the stairs in what appeared to be an organized game of hide-and-seek. Some parents gave chase; some gave up.

After the formal speeches of thanks by Nicole and Stephan, Victor Andrade stood at the top of a wide stairway with a microphone in his hand. The crowd quieted again.

“There is no greater gift than to be able to share the end of my son’s bachelorhood with all of our friends and family. We welcome Nicole into our family and look forward to the little ones they will bring to us. For now, let’s enjoy the ones we have.” He beckoned to someone off to one side. His blonde wife stepped forward, leading several men carrying large white polished boards. “Katrine saw this in a magazine and fell in love with the idea.”

The crowd watched as the workers quickly transformed one side of the stairway into a wide slide with a thick white pad at the bottom of it. One of the men handed Victor and his wife what looked like a white, velvet mattress with handles sewn into the top. They sat side by side at the top of the stairs. Victor said, “After the children have their fill, I hope you will try this for yourselves. Life is too short not to fill it with as much love and laughter as you can squeeze into it.”

They pushed off from the top, and the crowd cheered as they flew down the slide and came to a gentle stop on the padded bottom. Laughing, Victor stood, then offered a hand to

his wife and helped her up. She fixed her hair with one hand and beamed a smile at the surrounding crowd.

A herd of children charged up the other stairway and formed a line.

This was what his mother had always loathed about her husband's family. He remembered as a child being told to sit instead of join in. A Stanfield would never laugh as loudly they did. A Stanfield always remembered the importance of the family's reputation.

She'd done her best to keep his brothers and him separate from what she considered vulgar behavior. Yes, he had visited the island many times, but he'd never stayed overnight. Every visit had felt like a betrayal to his mother, who said they had never accepted her as one of them.

Nor, she'd warned, would they ever accept her sons.

He'd believed her.

He'd believed everything. He hated that he was no longer sure he should have.

Gio felt his gut twist with guilt. His brothers were off to one side of the room, included but still separate. Despite their earlier acceptance of the invitation to come, he knew they also had mixed feelings. Their mother stood between them and exuberance as surely as if she were there chastising them for being tempted to join in.

At his side, Julia pulled on his hand and asked, "Do you want to try it?"

He shook his head, not knowing what she was referring to.

"The slide," she clarified and looked at it with longing. "Have you ever seen anything so incredible?"

His answer stuck in his throat as he took in her unfiltered excitement. "No," he answered honestly. His heart beat double-time in his chest. Julia didn't cling to everything she'd ever done wrong and let it hold her back. She was more alive in that moment than he'd ever allowed himself to be, and it made him want to experience the wedding through her eyes.

A teasing grin lit her face as she said, “I dare you to do it with me.”

“I don’t accept dares,” he said decisively.

“You should,” she went up on her tiptoes and whispered in his ear. “They can be fun.”

Her voice sent shivers of pleasure down his spine and he was instantly, painfully hard. “There are many things I want to do with you. Trying out that slide is not one of them.”

“I suppose that officially makes me more daring than you,” Julia said with a yawn.

He frowned down at her. “Really?”

She studied her nails. “Sure. I flew off to a foreign country with you. That’s brave. You are afraid to look foolish in front of your own family. Not so brave.”

He took her by the arm, half amused, half insulted by her assessment of him. “Well, we can’t have that, can we?”

She hopped with excitement beside him. They’d almost made it to the stairs when his three brothers intercepted them.

Max blocked their way. “Hang on. Are you actually going up there?”

Nick raised a doubtful eyebrow. “Planning to dismantle it?”

Gio stepped around his brothers and continued to guide Julia toward the stairs.

Max asked, “Has he lost his mind?”

“No,” Luke said, “his heart.”

Gio stumbled as his brother’s words slammed into him.

A quick glance down at Julia made Gio groan.

She smiled up at him. A big, happy smile revealed she’d heard Luke.

He should tell her Luke was wrong. He was not falling in love with her.

But he’d never liked to lie.

Chapter Nineteen

Julia was walking back from the powder room when a smiling pregnant woman who didn't waste time with small talk hijacked her with a warm hug. "Maddy."

Maddy didn't let go as she said, "Luke was telling me how good he thinks you are for Gio. I thought the same thing when I first met you, but when you went sliding down the stairs together—I saw Gio laugh. I love you."

Okay, this is awkward. Julia gave her back a quick pat and coughed. "You're choking me."

With a light, embarrassed chuckle, Maddy released her. "I'm sorry. My emotions are all over the place. I'm just happy for you and Gio." A big smile spread across her face. "And a little envious. I remember what it was like to not be able to keep my hands off Richard. It's still good, but children make it more difficult to sneak off together."

Julia coughed again, and her face warmed with a blush. "Could we forget about earlier?" A sudden thought came to her as she remembered what Alessandro had said about his daughter. "You didn't tell anyone, did you?"

It was Maddy's turn to blush. "No one who would say anything. Don't worry."

Julia covered her eyes with one hand. Every floor should have an escape option. You click your heels twice and it swallows the mortified up, depositing them ... where didn't matter ... as long as it was far away.

In a moment of self-awareness, Maddy put a sympathetic hand on Julia's shoulder and said, "I know my family is a bit much to get used to, but we don't get involved unless we care."

Julia lowered her hand. "No, I'm sorry. My head is still spinning from all of this. Sometimes it feels like I've walked into a dream—a magical, beautiful world. Then I remind

myself that dreams are something you wake up from.” She met Maddy’s eyes seriously. “I don’t want to wake up.”

Maddy hugged her again, but this time quickly. “Maybe you won’t have to. Come on, there are a few more people I’d like to introduce you to before you go back to your date.” After taking two steps, she stopped again and said, “Speaking of you and Gio, my father doesn’t approve of you sharing a room. I tried to explain to him that you’re in the stage of your relationship where really it would be best for everyone if you have one, but he’s old-fashioned.”

Julia’s eyebrows rose. “You talked to him about me? About Gio? About me and Gio?”

Maddy started walking again in a rush. “I couldn’t help it. He gave me that sad look and I cracked. It’s some kind of parental mind control.”

Julia kept pace with Maddy, but she was thinking back to her earlier conversation with Alessandro and wondered if he’d known then. “I can’t believe you told your father.”

“He won’t say anything. Don’t worry. He likes you.”

* * *

Alessandro closed the door of the ultramodern bookless library he’d invited Gio into.

He waved for Gio to come farther inside. “It’s good to see you smiling.”

For just a moment, Gio clung to the uncomplicated happiness he’d found with Julia within the chaotic Andrade celebration. He’d always thought of himself as a man who had no patience for children. However, when he’d reached the bottom of the slide the first time he’d found himself eye level with a clapping little girl dressed in a frock that made her look like a doll. “You’re fast!”

“Higher mass objects have higher force on an incline plane,” he had explained as he stood up.

Julia had taken the hand he offered her and bent down to explain to the girl, “We’re bigger than you, so we go faster.”

“Would I go fast if I went with you?”

Gio had looked around for the girl’s mother. “Oh, I don’t think that would be a good ...”

“I bet you would,” Julia had said as if he hadn’t spoken, and offered her other hand to the little girl. “Let’s try it. My name is Julia.”

Big brown eyes had studied both of them. Then she’d taken Julia’s hand. “I’m Anna. I’m one of the flower girls tomorrow. I get a basket and roses and a big pink dress. I picked the dress myself because I’m all grown up now. I pick my own clothes. I can’t tie shoes yet, but we use Velcro. My brother knows how to tie shoes. He’s eight. But he isn’t a flower girl. He’s a boy. And he doesn’t get a dress because boys don’t wear dresses. My dress is pink. Nicole said I could pick whatever color I wanted because I’m important in the wedding. I carry the flowers. And I picked pink because princesses wear pink.” She’d stopped halfway up the stairs and directed a question to Gio. “Do you like this dress? It’s pink, too.”

She’d spun in front of him in her satin dress and stumbled, falling down a stair. Gio had caught the girl and steadied her. He hadn’t realized he was scowling down at her until she touched the middle of her forehead and said, “You shouldn’t frown like that. It gives you a wrinkle right here. And you’re old. Wrinkles stay on old people. Are you my cousin Gio?”

Gio had opened his mouth to answer, but the little girl was already speaking again. “My mom told me to stay out of his way. She said he can be grumpy, but you’re not grumpy, so you can’t be him.” She’d spun and started up the stairs again. “Come on, slowpokes. Mom said I can go down the slide five times. Does this count? I’m sharing it with you. I don’t think it counts. She told me five times and then I have to go upstairs to bed. So, tell her it doesn’t count. I don’t want to go to bed yet. This party is fun. Isn’t it fun?”

When the little girl sprinted ahead, Gio had growled into Julia’s ear, “She was cute before she started talking.”

Julia had joked, “She’s not so bad. She’s just excited. Come on—smile. You don’t want to give yourself a wrinkle. I hear

they stay on old people.”

“Old, huh? You’ll pay for that tonight.”

After stealing a quick kiss, Julia had laughed and sprinted up the stairs, saying, “I certainly hope so.”

The memory of the entire exchange brought an involuntary smile to Gio’s face.

Alessandro cleared his throat loudly, bringing Gio back to the present. “Have you been drinking, Gio?”

“No,” he said curtly, but he could understand the question. He wasn’t acting like himself. He didn’t feel like himself. For once, he felt like the past didn’t need to have a stranglehold on him. He could make amends. He could be free.

Alessandro took a seat on one of the couches. “Please, sit.”

Gio shook his head and remained standing. “I’d rather stand. What did you need to talk to me about?”

“You know we’re happy to have you here, Gio.”

Never one who had been open with his emotions, Gio merely pocketed his hands and waited. He doubted Alessandro had pulled him aside simply to express that sentiment.

His uncle walked over to the window and said, “Tomorrow Dominic Corisi will present the Isola Santos deed to Stephan and Nicole. Will that be a problem?”

There it was. The reason for their meeting.

Gio straightened to his full height. “What are you asking?”

“I always thought you weren’t interested in the island or the old house.” When Gio said nothing, Alessandro pushed. “But you were, weren’t you?”

“I would not have offered to purchase it had I not been,” Gio bit out.

“Purchase? Your mother returned the deed to me. It was in your father’s possession. Why would you offer to buy something that was already yours?”

Just as his mother had predicted, his uncle wanted to turn him against her. “My mother said she never had the deed.”

Alessandro pinched the bridge of his nose. “She lied. She returned it to us a few weeks after your father died. She said you had all discussed it and decided that owning it would bring back too many bad memories. I believed her. Especially considering the circumstances of your father’s death.”

Confusion and anger swirled within Gio.

Someone had lied.

He didn’t yet know who.

“I see.” But he didn’t. Nothing made sense to him anymore. He had next to no connection to his uncle anymore. Why this intricate cover-up story?

Alessandro appeared genuinely distressed. “We never would have sold the island if we had known you wanted it.”

Uncovering one lie only revealed more. “You expect me to believe that?”

Affronted, Alessandro rose to his full height and said, “You’re family, for God’s sake.”

Family. He was beginning to hate that term. “That label doesn’t mean as much to me as it once did.”

Alessandro reached out as if he were going to put a hand on Gio’s shoulder in support, then let his hand drop to his side.

He’d come for answers, but he was leaving with more questions. If his uncles were as cold and conniving as he’d been raised to believe they were, why were they making such a production out of pretending to care about him now?

Was this why the invitation scared his mother? She’d even gone so far as trying to pay off Julia—why? *Did she think it would stop him from coming here?*

“I should have spoken directly to you and your brothers. Patrice asked us not to talk to you about it. She said it was too upsetting for you.”

Gio spun on his heel and walked to the door, then stopped and, without turning, asked, “Alessandro, did you know about my father? About Venice?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you think we deserved to know?”

“It was not my place to say anything.”

Gio nodded once, a cold fury filling him.

Behind him, his uncle called out, “Gio, where are you going?”

With his hand on the door handle, Gio spoke without turning. “There is nothing here for me now.”

His uncle spoke softly. “What would you have me do?”

“What you have always done for me—nothing.” Gio walked out the door and closed it firmly behind him.

Chapter Twenty

Julia's head was still spinning with the names of everyone Maddy had introduced her to. She doubted she'd ever been hugged as much in her life as she had that night. The experience had certainly changed her opinion of the rich and famous. At least these rich and these famous. She'd expected to feel out of place, but the Andrade clan knew how to make a guest feel welcome. Although they dressed in more expensive clothing than her friends at home, they were just as quick to play pranks or tease one other with an embarrassing recollection.

This is going to be an amazing weekend.

"Come on," Gio said harshly and took Julia by the arm.

"What?" Julia asked in surprise as she tried to keep up with his long strides—not an easy feat in heels. "What happened?"

He didn't answer until they had cleared the front door and were walking down the path. "We're leaving."

Julia dug in her heels and halted them both abruptly. "Whoa. An hour ago you were happy and mingling. What did I miss?"

"Nothing."

She looked down at her arm. "Really? Because you're dragging me around like something happened."

He released her and frowned. He let out a long sigh. "I need to get out of here."

"Apparently."

"Let's go." He took her arm in his hand again, this time more gently, and led her down the path toward the planes. "The pilot is expecting us."

Julia looked over her shoulder at the party. "What about your brothers?"

“They can find their own way home.”

“And our things?”

“I had the pilot arrange for them to be brought to the plane.”

Well, aren't you in a snit?

They were walking up the stairs of the private plane when Julia couldn't contain her displeasure any longer. “You're not going to tell me why we're leaving?”

He let go of her arm only when the outer hatch was closed. Julia took a seat near the window. Gio sat across from her. The plane took off with neither of them saying a word.

His eyes burned with passion and a darker emotion. “I should send you home on the next flight out of Rome. I should get as far away from you as I can—because when I'm with you I want the impossible.”

“What happened at the party, Gio?”

“The truth was more disappointing than I was prepared for.”

Julia undid her seat belt and crossed over to him. She sat sideways on his lap and looped her arms around his neck.

He tensed beneath her, and for a second Julia wondered if he was going to ask her to get off him, but he didn't. His arms closed around her, and he buried his face in her hair.

Julia pulled back and looked into his eyes. “You can tell me it's none of my business ...”

“It's none of your business.”

“And I don't need to know what you found out.”

“I have no intention of telling you.”

“But why not turn to your brothers? They were right there. You weren't alone at the party.”

“There was no need to involve them.”

“I have a feeling they're already involved, regardless of how much you keep from them.”

“Are you done?” he asked and moved her hair aside so he could kiss the side of her neck.

She pushed at his chest. This was what he did. He used sex to distract her. *Does he really think he can distract me with—oh, that’s nice.* Gio pushed one strap of her dress aside and slid a hand inside the neckline, gently cupping her bare breast.

Focus. This is important. “You shouldn’t shut people out just because things get complicated.”

An excited shiver ran down her back as she felt the bulge of his erection begin to throb against her thighs. He unzipped the back of her dress and lowered it, exposing both her breasts to his eager mouth. She gave in to the pleasure of it and buried her hands deep in his hair, holding his head as his mouth teased and worshipped her. *We can continue this talk later.*

Across the cabin of the plane the attendant coughed nervously, and then Julia heard the sound of the cockpit door opening. What had she seen? It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered as the heat of the moment enveloped both of them. There was a need that overrode everything else, even modesty.

Gio picked Julia up and turned her so she straddled his lap, claiming her mouth possessively with his as he did. He pulled at both sides of her gown until the material was bunched around her waist. His deft fingers pushed the material of her silk panties aside and dove between her lower lips.

“I need you. Here. Now.”

Julia hastily unbuttoned his shirt, pushing it aside so she could run her hands over his muscular chest and down his rock-hard abs. Between hot kisses, Julia said, “God, yes.”

He claimed her mouth, plundering and demanding, all the while working her with his fingers until she was wet and eager for him. “Stand up,” he ordered.

She did. She would have done anything for him in that moment.

“Take your dress off.”

She pushed her dress the rest of the way down and stepped out of it, and her satin panties.

He laid a hand on her stomach. “You are so perfect.”

He stood and also stripped, then pushed her down in the chair and pulled her forward so only the edge of her ass stopped her from falling to the floor at his feet. He sat in the chair across from her, and took his hard cock in his own hand. “I want to see you come for me, Julia.”

Julia slid a hand into her own wet folds and rubbed her throbbing clit. She rubbed it with an increasing speed. Slowly at first, then faster and faster. As she did, she watched him stroke himself, up and down. Growing even larger.

She reached up and kneaded her own breast, imagining that it was his hand. Spread open before him, she felt his hot gaze on her sex like a caress. Her hand clenched as heat spread through her and she came to a shuddering orgasm while he watched.

He stood, sheathed himself in a condom then pulled her to her feet and turned her around so she was facing the chair. With one hand he bent her over. His first thrust was deep and powerful and she muffled her cries in her hand. He held her hips in place and thrust again. Deeper. Harder. Building heat and waves of pleasure on what she'd brought to herself.

Julia gripped the chair arms as he pounded into her from behind. He slowed and eased himself out, then thrust back into her, and she cried out again before she thought to muffle the sound. He repeated the move and she stopped caring who heard her. She wanted it again and again. When she finally came it was with such volume that she was sure someone would open the cockpit door to make sure they were still alive.

He joined her in the orgasm. Then withdrew, cleaned himself off, and pulled her into his lap.

She collapsed onto his bare chest, loving how his heart beat loudly in her ear ... slowing as hers did when they both came regained their senses.

As sanity returned, so did Julia's questions. He gave his body to her freely, but when it came to his heart he still closed her out. She stood and put on her dress, adjusting it so it covered her once again. Gio disposed of the condom and refastened his own clothing. Both ruffled and flushed, they stood facing each other.

Julia asked, "Where are we going?"

He sat and pulled her back onto his lap, this time tucking her against his broad chest. "Venice."

The idea of visiting one of the few places of her dreams was enough to distract her. She sat up. "Are you serious? Oh, my God, Venice. I forgive you for making me miss the wedding." He didn't look nearly as happy as she did about the idea. "If you were hoping to take someone who wouldn't be excited about it, you picked the wrong woman. I've always dreamed of going there. The architecture. The bridges. The gondolas. I could orgasm again just thinking about it."

He gave her a small smile. "My competition is a city?"

Julia didn't deny it. "Only one. There is something about it that has always called to me."

He studied her face. "It called to my father, also. He owned a palazzo on the Grand Canal."

"A palace? Right on the main canal? Does your family still own it?"

"No."

She placed a hand lightly on one of his cheeks. "Help me understand, Gio. I'm trying to."

He looked out the plane window, collecting his thoughts before answering her. "I don't completely understand it myself. I swore I would never return to Venice, but when I'm with you the past matters to me again. The truth matters." He breathed in deeply, then said, "We should be landing soon. Tonight we'll stay in a hotel north of Venice. Tomorrow we'll take a water taxi into the city."

Julia closed her eyes to a rush of emotions she couldn't contain. She wanted to shake him and demand that he tell her what had upset him.

But she knew she'd lose him if she pushed him.

And she wasn't ready for that.

* * *

The next morning, Julia stood beside Gio in the back of the water taxi as it sped across the lagoon toward Venice. The wind had whipped her long curls around until she'd rolled them into a ponytail and contained them with one hand. The taxi bounced in the waves, jostling her against Gio. He moved behind her, holding on to the wooden top of the boat with both hands and supporting her with his body. She smiled at him over her shoulder, and his breath caught in his throat.

She pointed to islands along the way with childlike enthusiasm. "What is that island?"

He studied the small, deserted island. "Isola Compalto?" He wasn't sure.

She gave him a funny look. "You don't know?"

He shrugged and shook his head. "I'm not a fan of Venice or Venetians. I don't see the point. Why pour so much energy into something that was doomed from the start? So what if it sinks into the ocean? Build another city on better stilts, if that's what you want, but don't whine about the water if you choose to live in the middle it."

Julia turned so she was facing him. "You are completely missing the point of Venice."

A wave tossed her forward and rubbed her against him. "Which is?" he asked huskily, not actually caring about the answer, but loving how her face lit up at his question. If pretending to care kept her in his arms and smiling, he would listen to her read a dissertation on the history of every bridge in the city.

"It's a city that shouldn't have been. It should have failed a hundred times over. The wooden pillars they built it on should

have rotted away, but the clay beneath the city protects it. Everything about Venice is a battle with nature. The soil is full of salt, so if you wanted to plant something, you had to bring in your own dirt, your own seeds, and protect both from the very place you planted it on. A place that is struggling so desperately just to survive shouldn't care about beauty, but it does."

"How do you know all this?"

"I love to read travel blogs," she said. "They say that if you want to make Venetians smile, give them a flower. Because a flower doesn't serve any purpose outside of bringing a person joy. And some would ask if a flower is then worth the effort. A Venetian would tell you that it is. That those simple pleasures are worth any price."

Julia's words cut through Gio. He was confused with his own choice to run to the same city where his father had found refuge. Could he find his own answers there?

What do I do with this burning anger? How do I stop it from consuming me?

Julia wants me to believe in love, but how can I when everywhere I look I see a twisted version of it?

An impatient frown creased Julia's brow. "If you don't intend to enjoy yourself at all, why are we here? Why come to this amazing place and choose to be miserable? Because it is a choice, Gio."

She looked up at him from beneath her long lashes and, right then, he chose her. "I'll play tourist with you for a day, Julia, on one condition."

"That is?"

"We leave everything else behind us. Just you and me in Venice. Come away with me, Julia. Let's leave all this behind." His phone rang in his breast pocket. He took it out and groaned. "That's Luke. Probably wants to know where we are."

Julia grabbed his phone and threw it into the lagoon. When he opened his mouth to say something she put her hand over

his mouth softly. “Step one to running away—no phones.” Then she smiled. “Before you get upset, now we’re even.”

The irritation he expected to feel didn’t surface. Instead, it was as if she’d cut him free from suffocating tethers. No one knew he was in Venice. No one expected him back at his office. He wanted to lose himself in Julia—not just in her body, but in the full experience of her. He pulled her roughly against him and kissed her until they were both shaking with need.

The driver turned and called back to them. “Do you still want me to stop, or would you like me to circle around?”

Gio raised his head and looked into Julia’s eyes. “What do you want to see?”

She smiled up at him. “Everything.”

He addressed the driver. “Do you give guided tours? It’s her first time here.”

The driver shrugged one shoulder. “Me? No. I don’t do the tour so much.”

Gio said, “I’ll pay you triple whatever you charge.”

A large smile spread across the driver’s face. “Ah, then coming up is the Rialto Bridge. There is a bar nearby, very nice. You look at the ceiling and all you see are women’s ... how do you say ... bras? Tell them I sent you. On your left is a hotel that if you go by at night sometimes the women, they don’t close the shutters. I don’t judge, I just enjoy.”

A chuckle rumbled deep within Gio. He met Julia’s eyes and said, “He did say he doesn’t normally give tours.”

Julia smiled up at him. “I can’t imagine why not.”

They laughed together as the taxi driver continued to give them insider tips that were surely not mentioned in more formal tours.

After the boat tour, Gio walked with Julia up and down a maze of streets. They crossed bridges. They stopped for gelato. They laughed as they watched young American children chasing pigeons in St. Mark’s Square.

Julia enthusiastically asked a fellow tourist for directions to the Gallerie dell'Accademia and headed off with Gio to find it. They wandered in and out of the many shops along the way. Julia stopped frequently to study a feature of a building or to share a factoid she'd read about Venetians battling the rising waters and its effect on their homes. It was a day out of time, and even though Gio knew it couldn't last, he felt happier than he had since his father had passed.

When they eventually found the museum, they spent a couple of hours viewing its extensive collection of Venetian and European paintings. It was early afternoon when they reentered the sunshine and the crowded streets. Just outside the museum, they found a wooden bridge that arched across the Grand Canal. Julia paused at the top of it, and Gio stopped beside her. "Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?" she asked without looking away from the view.

Gio didn't answer. He'd spent too many years hating the city to ever truly find it beautiful. The day had given him one answer, though. It was possible to find pleasure in denial.

So, perhaps he was more like his father than he knew.

Which was not good news.

* * *

Julia glanced over her shoulder expecting to see Gio smiling, but instead she caught him fighting back whatever inner demon he denied having. "What are you thinking about, Gio?"

"Nothing," he said dismissively.

Julia chewed her bottom lip. "I thought you were enjoying this as much as I am."

He stood behind her, pushed the hair off the back of her neck, and kissed her gently. "I was enjoying you."

"So, you've been humoring me all day?"

He turned her in his arms. "Let's not argue. It doesn't matter."

His words were a cold slap of reality. "It matters to me. I want to know how you really feel."

“Do you?” He looked down at the structure they stood on and shook his head in disgust. “Take a good look at what we’re standing on. Wood over hideous steel. A façade to keep the tourists happy. You want the truth? It’s ugly. Fake.”

Julia froze in his arms. “Like our day here?” she asked softly.

He didn’t deny it.

“Like us?” Julia searched his face for some hint of how he felt. “You asked me to leave it all behind and I tried to. I tried to tell myself it’s okay that you don’t want to tell me what happened on the island—that you don’t want to tell me anything. These last few weeks have been amazing, but you shut me out of everything that’s important. What are we doing together, Gio? Are we working towards something, or am I just this summer’s entertainment?”

Still he held his silence.

“Say something.” She pushed him away with both hands, then stood in front of him, chest heaving with emotion. “I keep waiting for you to open up to me. I keep thinking that if I give you more time you’ll let me in. But you’re not going to, are you?”

“What do you want me to say, Julia?” The coldness of his tone tore into her.

Her eyes filled with tears. “Just the truth. Do you love me?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it with a snap.

Well, there is my answer. “I can’t do this. I can’t stay with you knowing that I’m the only one who is going to mourn this when it ends. I’m sorry, Gio. This is my fault. You’re exactly the man you said you were. We need to end this before you break my heart.” She took a step backward, away from him.

“It was a mistake to bring you to the wedding ... and to Venice. We’ll fly back to the States tonight. Once we’re back in New York this will all blow over.”

“I am flying home, but not with you. It wasn’t the wedding or Venice. It’s you. You don’t get it, and I can’t explain it

better than I have. Good-bye, Gio.”

“You’re going to leave over this?”

“Yes,” she said. “Because in the end you can’t give me the one thing I want from you.” She stepped away from him. “I’ll take a taxi boat back to the airport. Please send my things back to me in New York.”

“No,” he said firmly.

“Don’t, Gio. Don’t make this difficult. I need to go home.”

“We’ll fly back together.”

She shook her head. She wanted to hate him, but she couldn’t. He wanted to love her. She could see it in his eyes. He wasn’t ready to love anyone. That was what he’d tried to tell her, but she hadn’t wanted to hear it. “No. There was a reason you came to Italy. I don’t know what you’re looking for, Gio, but find it. Find those answers. Maybe then you’ll understand what I’m asking you for. And if that happens, come find me.”

“Julia—”

Julia turned and walked quickly away. She didn’t want to give him a chance to change her mind. She didn’t want something that looked good on the surface.

She wanted it all.

Chapter Twenty-One

With Julia's words echoing in his head, Gio stood in the small courtyard behind his father's old palazzo. It looked as if every part of it was in need of repair. He wondered if it had looked the same nine years earlier when a younger him had stood in that same spot the day he'd come to collect his father's remains.

He didn't remember many details from that day, just the anger and hurt that had filled him. He wouldn't have described his parents' marriage as warm, but he'd been unprepared for the reality of how little his father had respected it.

While waiting for the paperwork to be completed, his father's mistress had asked to speak to him. He remembered being enraged by the audacity of her request. He didn't want to speak to her. He didn't want her to exist at all.

His mother had predicted that Leora would try to pull him aside. She'd warned Gio that such a woman would say anything to milk them for more money than she'd already taken from his father. "Don't think she's above blackmail, George," his mother had said. "She may threaten to tell her story. You have to keep this out of the papers. The company will suffer enough from your father's passing. A scandal could do real damage." Whether her tears were born from anger or loss, Gio didn't know, but that had been the only time he'd ever seen his mother cry. "I couldn't handle the shame on top of losing your father. Make it go away, George. Please. Make sure no one ever knows about her."

And so he'd refused to listen to anything Leora had tried to tell him that day. Instead, he'd threatened to bring the full force of his connections down upon her if she ever spoke of her relationship with his father. She was worried about losing the house, even though his father had promised to leave it to her. He'd assured her that no one was interested in it unless they heard her name again. If they did, he would utilize every

lawyer on their payroll to break the will. She would be left with nothing. Unless she kept her silence.

He'd always believed he'd done the right thing. Until now.

He hadn't told his brothers because he'd wanted to protect them from the truth. He'd heard part of a row once between Nick and their mother that sounded as if Nick knew something. Or suspected. Nick had been confronting their mother about her role in it, which Gio had never understood. No woman deserved the humiliation of discovering her husband had another woman on the side.

Whatever their mother's response had been, Nick had been furious afterward. Gio had sworn to his mother that he would never tell anyone about Leora, so even when pressed for answers by Nick, he'd kept the truth to himself.

If I did the right thing, why does it all feel so wrong?

What's real and what's a lie?

I don't know anymore.

The door at the top of the stairs opened and Gio was faced, for the second time, with his father's mistress. This time, however, he saw her as a person and not the embodiment of his father's betrayal. She was modestly dressed in a blue cotton blouse and matching skirt. Her short hair curled and framed a face that, had he not spent so many years despising, he would have said had aged well. She had a classic, simple beauty, without the artificial enhancements he was used to seeing in women her age.

Was it that beauty that had drawn his father to her? Brought him back to her year after year? What was here that had been worth risking everything—marriage, children, fortune?

He was so lost in the past he didn't realize she was speaking to him. "Gio? Is that you?"

He froze.

She beckoned him to come closer. "It is you. Come. Come inside."

At any other time in his life, Gio would have said something cutting and left. But Julia was right. He'd come to Italy for answers, and he wouldn't find them if he walked away. "I wouldn't have thought you'd be very pleased to see me."

She opened the door wider. "I've waited a long time for you to return."

He walked up the palazzo's stone stairs and followed her through the back door of the house and into a salon. The experience was like stepping back into time. From the heavy tapestries on the floor to the ornate wooden ceilings, it was obvious that efforts had been made to retain the charm of the seventeenth-century palace. The furniture was all made from dark wood—simple pieces with worn cloth cushions. But the house was immaculately clean, with no evidence of house staff.

Gio noticed pictures of him and his brothers scattered around the home. On the walls, on the mantel. Everywhere people normally put photos of their family. Nearly ten years after his father's death. Gio couldn't understand it. He walked around the room and studied the photos. His father was in many of them, laughing with his boys.

In one photo, the one that stopped Gio in his tracks, his father was holding a baby. Gio looked over his shoulder at Leora.

She nodded and said softly, "That's my daughter, Gigi."

"How old is she now?" Gio asked.

"Twenty and away at college. I borrowed monies against this house, but she's worth it."

Gio found another photo of his father and the girl, when she was about ten, holding his father's hand and smiling up at him. "Was she? Is she?" He wasn't sure how to ask.

He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

"Yes, she's your half sister. She has your father's eyes. As do you."

“Does she know?”

“That you’re related? Yes. She’s always known.”

Gio took one of the photos of her off the wall and held it out in question. “And you never told anyone?” So many emotions were rushing through him he wasn’t sure how he felt.

Leora asked, “Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

“No,” Gio said and a sick feeling came over him. “She wasn’t a secret, was she?”

Leora smoothed her hands down her plain dress. “Your mother had every right to hate me and any child we made. I understood that. Your father loved Patrice, so I did also. I kept my silence out of respect for her.”

Gio laid the photo down on the mantel. “Living with another woman’s husband doesn’t fit any definition of love or respect I’m aware of.”

Leora picked up the photo he’d put down and placed it back where it belonged. “Your mother has always been a complicated woman. She didn’t love your father. She tried to, but she couldn’t fool herself or him.”

Gio turned his back to Leora and looked out the window, seeing but not seeing the boats passing on the Grand Canal below. “Isn’t that what all married men tell the women they screw on the side? That their wives don’t love them?”

“Maybe,” she said softly. “But in this case, it was true. I have nothing to prove to you, Gio. No reason to lie to you. Your mother is a very unhappy woman. She has been for a long time. Happiness is a choice, you know. Like love. You either open yourself up to it or you don’t. Your mother could never let the past go long enough to see what all that anger was costing her. She let a man who loved her slip away to Venice. A man who would have gone back to her if she’d ever let him into her heart.” The words were too similar to those Julia had used for him not to be shaken by them.

He turned back to face her, unable to conceal the bitterness in his voice. “My father made a second family here because he

loved my mother so much? Pardon me if I find your take on the scenario tainted by your desire to make it palatable.”

Leora looked at him sadly. “Believe what you want, but Gio loved your mother, and he loved you and your brothers.”

“Why do you call him Gio? He went by George.”

With memories luring her away for a moment, Leora said, “Not when he was here in Italy. In the States, he was who he thought your mother needed him to be. He may have even been happy in that American lifestyle for a while. But in his heart he was always Gio.” She smiled at him warmly. “Here he laughed louder, worried less about what others thought of him, and enjoyed the simple pleasures—like being a father.”

“Father to a bastard child.”

Leora shrugged. “Call Gigi what you want, but it won’t change what we had. Your father loved us. Just as he loved you.”

When Gio said nothing, Leora walked over to a shelf and took down a leather-bound book. “Do you think your father loved you less because he had us?” She handed him the large book. “He kept a scrapbook of you and your brothers. He would sit with Gigi and tell her stories about all of you. He promised one day he would introduce her to you and she would have a large family, as he’d always had.”

Gio reluctantly took the book and opened it angrily. His father had filled page after page with the story of his sons’ childhoods. There were clippings from articles they had been mentioned in, along with notes describing why the event had been important. He closed the book abruptly. “Why didn’t he?”

“Only your father could truly answer that question. Or perhaps your mother.” She studied his face and asked, “Tell me, Gio, why do you choose to use the Italian version of your name? Who are you in your heart?”

“I’m not my father,” Gio said defensively. He thought back to the summer he’d chosen to no longer go by George. It had been during one of his visits to Isola Santos. His cousins had

called him by the name and it had felt right. So right that nearly no one called him George anymore. *God, how could I have forgotten? All this time I told myself that I hated them, even as I hung on to the one thing they gave me.*

My name.

“We are all our parents in one way or another, Gio. The best and the worst of them. Find the good in your father, Gio, and forgive him for what he’s not here to explain to you. And don’t judge your mother too harshly. We don’t know what closed her heart.”

Gio was coming to the uncomfortable realization that after ten years of fearing that he would end up like his father—he’d become something worse.

He was as bitter and closed off as his mother.

And it had cost him just as it had cost her.

It may very well have robbed him of the only woman he could imagine spending the rest of his life with. *Julia.*

He looked Leora in the eye and asked, “Would you mind if I contact Gigi?”

“I would love that.”

Gio walked around the room again, studying the photos of his family and hers. “My brothers don’t know about you. I thought it was better for them if they didn’t. I was wrong. I’ll tell them about you now. About both of you.”

“You are always welcome here, Gio. Your brothers, too.”

Hitting an overload of emotions, Gio made his excuses and left—promising to return. He walked back to the bridge where Julia had left him and stood there for a long time, replaying the day in his head.

* * *

An hour later, Gio stepped out of a hired car onto a private airfield. The pilot met him and asked where he wanted to go, but Gio didn’t answer.

“Wherever Julia went,” didn’t feel like a sane answer. Was she still in Italy, or on her way back to New York?

A limo pulled up beside them and all four of the doors opened simultaneously.

“Looks like we got here just in time,” Luke said.

Gio shook his head in surprise. “What are all of you doing here?”

A tall blond man stepped out of the car and said, “We came to find you.”

Gio’s eyebrows rose at the sight of the would-be groom. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

Stephan smiled sadly. “We postponed the wedding until tomorrow. Nicole understands why we had to.”

Gio looked from cousin to brothers and back. “I don’t.”

Stephan took an envelope out of his pocket and bounced it in his hand as if he were weighing it before offering it. “I found myself in a tricky spot this past summer. A close brush with my own mortality changed the way I look at many things.”

Gio took the envelope. He opened it and read the contents. His name was clearly printed on the top of the deed for Isola Santos.

“I can’t take this,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

“I don’t want it. It should have gone to you. Just be careful, Gio. I spent years chasing it. I thought it was important. It’s just a rock in the ocean. It doesn’t matter. Nicole is what’s important to me now. And my family.”

A rush of emotion filled Gio. Stephan wasn’t pretending to care about him.

He did.

There was so much he wanted to say to him. So much he needed to tell his brothers. He didn’t know where to start. “Perhaps we could be the first generation to share the island. You can have Dominic’s side.”

Stephan choked on a laugh. “That’s cruel.”

In a more serious tone, Gio said, “I was wrong to leave your wedding. Wrong about more than I can even begin to explain now.”

Stephan put a hand on Gio’s shoulder and said, “You are not the first Andrade to make a mistake, and you won’t be the last.”

“Speaking of mistakes ...” Max looked around and asked, “Did you lose Julia?”

Gio shrugged one shoulder unhappily. “She went back to New York.”

Luke shook his head. “That’s a shame.”

An uncharacteristically sympathetic Nick said, “We liked her.”

“She said I wasn’t ready.”

“And what did you say when she said that?” Nick asked.

Gio shrugged again. “What could I say?”

Nick turned to his cousin. “We can’t lose Julia. I actually like Gio when he’s around her.”

Luke broke the silence that followed his brother’s declaration by asking, “How far could she have gotten?”

Max looked at Gio. “Is she on a commercial flight?”

“Just call her. Maybe she’s not on the plane yet,” Max suggested.

“I broke her phone. And even if she had it, her number is in mine, which is on the bottom of the ocean,” Gio said in frustration.

Luke looked at his oldest brother with a funny expression on his face. “I’m ready to diagnose you, Gio.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You have a severe case of, ‘In love with no fucking idea of what to do about it.’” He shook his head sadly. “It’s the worst I’ve seen.”

“She wanted to leave,” Gio defended himself, even as he kicked himself for letting her leave. “What was I supposed to do? Kidnap her?”

Stephan shrugged. “I’ve seen it work.”

Max said, “And Gio thinks I hang out with a questionable crowd?”

Stephan asked, “Do you love her?”

There were many things that Gio was no longer certain about, but he knew the answer to that question. “Yes, I do.”

“Then go get her. Tell her you love her. Everything else will work out.”

A ray of hope lit and grew within Gio. Could it be that easy? Could he choose love? “You’re right. I have to tell her how I feel. I’m going back to New York. I wish I knew what flight she was on.” He looked at his cousin in apology. “It’ll mean I’ll miss your wedding, but I have to find her.”

Stephan groaned. “I know someone who can find out anything. He could probably tell us if she’s en route or at the airport. He can access almost any database.”

“You mean a hacker?”

“He doesn’t like that term, but yes.” Stephan made a brief phone call, then said, “She has a two-hour layover in Rome.”

Determination filled Gio. “I still have time.”

“Just make sure you’re back for the ceremony tomorrow,” Stephan said in resignation. “Or Nicole will kill me.”

Gio hesitated before he left. He looked at his three smiling brothers and said, “I know I haven’t always been that easy to get along with, but when I get back we need to talk. I need to make some things right.”

Nick made a face at Luke. “Why does love make you sound so much like you’re dying?”

* * *

Julia used some of her time in the airport to check her phone messages via a public phone—an expensive necessity. She needed to reconnect with her life. *Now*. Her father had called twice. He said there was nothing important but asked that she call when she had time.

She had a couple of messages from friends back in Rhode Island who were wondering how New York was treating her. Only her closest friends were going to hear the real story, and even then she wasn't sure she'd be able to talk about any of the past week for a long time.

What are the five stages of realizing you just did something too stupid to tell your friends?

Denial: It was not a bad idea to run away to a foreign country with a man I barely know.

Anger: Until he turned out to be a complete jackass who didn't fall in love instantly the way everyone does in books.

Bargaining: I'll never do anything like this again if I can just fall out of love with him as fast as I fell in love.

Depression: I can't believe I did this. I told myself not to. I knew it would end badly, but that didn't stop me, did it? Instead of doing something important—like saving my family's company—I go off and get my heart broken by someone who told me he wasn't looking for anything serious.

But do I listen?

No, I see only what I want to see.

Acceptance? Not likely to happen for a while.

Julia hit the button for the final message. She'd half hoped it would be from Gio, but it was a woman whose voice she didn't recognize. "Hello, my name is Lisa. I'm Mrs. Rockport's personal assistant. I'm calling on her behalf to invite you to her house next week. She's received so many compliments on your necklace that she'd like to commission it in gold and diamonds as well as look at your other designs."

Julia played the message a second time, and then a third.

I did it.

I found my buyer.

She called her father to tell him. He was happy, but not surprised. He said he always knew she would sell them. She promised to start sending him money as soon as it came in and, just as she knew he would, her father told her it wasn't necessary.

“Dad, I'll be able to come back now. I can help you figure out the books and work everything out with the bank.”

“You don't have to, Julia. I accepted a buyout offer.”

“Oh, Dad. No.”

“It's okay, Julia. It's what I wanted. I was hanging on to my factory because I didn't want to let my employees go. But the new owner says he'll keep everyone on. I have some money in the bank now and more time to be with your mother. This was for the best.”

The news was bittersweet to Julia. “I'll come see you next weekend, Dad.”

“We'll be here, honey.”

Julia hung up the phone and fought back the wave of sadness that filled her. She couldn't imagine her family without their furniture store.

It also meant there was no longer any reason for her to be in New York. She could create Mrs. Rockport's orders anywhere. She could return to her apartment in the city, but she wouldn't be happy there. Not without Gio.

Her flight number was called and Julia walked to her gate. The attendant looked at her ticket, then let her through. Although Julia was lost in thought, she stopped midway down the enclosed ramp and noted that no one was behind her. She hadn't seen anyone in line in front of her either.

Maybe I'm early?

No, they said it was time to board.

The stewardess at the plane ushered her forward, which put her somewhat at ease. Julia stopped again before the plane

door and looked over her shoulder again.

Did I actually think he would come after me?

I'm hopeless.

With that, Julia stepped through the door of the plane. It was empty. She looked around and gasped. Every seat in first class was overflowing with pink roses. She walked down the aisle. Every seat in the next section was also covered with pink roses. She stood in the middle of the plane and started to cry.

“When I pictured this moment, I didn’t imagine you crying,” Gio said from behind her.

Julia spun. She wanted to run and throw herself in his arms, but she was afraid. Afraid to have her heart broken for a second time that day.

He walked to her and held out a hand, but she stood frozen in place. He let his hand drop to his side and said, “I’ve been an ass.”

Julia nodded, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

“I’m not good at talking about how I feel.”

Still Julia silently watched and waited.

“I thought I was happy before I met you, Julia. But I wasn’t. I was comfortable with being miserable. That’s not the same thing. I didn’t want to change. I didn’t think I could.” He stepped closer to her and took one of her hands in his. “You told me that I wouldn’t let you in, and you were right. I had gotten used to closing myself off. I forgot how to let anyone in.”

Julia gave his hand a supportive squeeze and held his eyes.

“I didn’t find all the answers I was looking for in Venice, Julia, but I learned something about myself.”

“You did?” Fresh tears poured down Julia’s cheeks.

“Yes. I don’t want to repeat the mistakes my parents made. I don’t want to spend my life hiding what I feel.”

Julia laid a hand on Gio's cheek and smiled up at him through her tears. "And how is that?"

"I love you, Julia. I can't promise that life with me will be easy, or that you won't need to walk me through some of this, but I can promise you that no one will ever love you more than I do." He kissed her with all the love he'd been holding back, and the last of Julia's fears fell away.

When their kiss broke off, she said, "I love you, too, Gio."

"I should have told you what happened on the island. I was angry and I'm used to burying those feelings."

"What happened?"

He hugged her to him, tucked her beneath his chin, and said, "Alessandro told me that my mother had returned the deed for the island to him. She'd told him we didn't want the island. All this time I hated him for thinking I wasn't one of them enough to give it to me, when it was my mother who didn't want me to have it."

Julia hugged him tightly. "Why would she do that?"

Gio shook his head sadly. "I don't know. She never liked my father's family. That's actually putting it mildly. She couldn't tolerate being around them at all. Apparently her hatred of them took priority over the feelings of her sons."

"I'm so sorry to hear that."

"I'm not." He kissed her forehead. "I needed to know the truth. I was trapped in all the lies. Suffocating beneath them. My brother was right—I needed that smack with a lamp. I needed to wake up."

"What will you do now?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but I know that we can figure it out together."

"We ... I like that. It still doesn't feel real. Are you really here?"

"I sure hope so, or I paid all of the passengers from this plane a lot of money to find alternate flights for nothing."

She pulled back in surprise and asked, “You paid everyone to take another flight?”

He pulled her against him again. “You’re marrying a very rich man. I get what I want.”

Julia’s stomach did a somersault at his words. Did he just say? Did he just ask? “Was that a proposal?”

He raised one eyebrow—at first neither confirming nor denying. “You know I don’t ask when the outcome isn’t in question.”

“And what makes you think—”

He cut off her question with a kiss that left them both breathless. “I don’t think. I know. You’re marrying me, Julia. I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”

She raised her hand and touched his cheek softly. “Well, I suppose if I have no choice.”

“Absolutely none.”

“What am I going to do with you?”

A lusty smile spread across his face. “I have plenty of ideas.”

She shook her head and laughed. “Here on this plane?”

He took her by the hand again. “My plane is refueling now.”

“Where to this time?”

“Anywhere you want to go.”

“It’s a shame we missed the wedding.”

“We didn’t miss anything. They postponed it until tomorrow.”

“For you?”

“For us.”

“We should go back.”

He nuzzled her neck. “Tomorrow. Tonight, come away with me, Julia, one more time. We’ll find a quiet place. Just you and

me.”

She hopped with excitement beside him, then stopped as a thought suddenly came to her. “Hey, I finally sold some of my jewelry pieces. Can you believe it?”

He pulled her close and hugged her. “With you, Julia, I believe in everything again.”

Epilogue

Maddy D'Argenson watched Nicole Corisi spin in her Marchesa wedding gown before a floor-length mirror in her bedroom suite. The amazing white gown was long-sleeved with a high neckline and lace bodice, the skirt layered in silk organza with tulle petals. Her long black hair was confined to a tight chignon on the crown of her head that would soon sport a long veil.

Nicole was radiant, smiling, and beautiful in a way only a bride can be.

Maddy sat on the edge of a chaise lounge, happy Nicole had allowed each attendant to choose her own style of bridesmaid gown. She'd chosen a figure-forgiving empire-waist chiffon one. She wasn't sure she would have fit into something with less give, considering how her stomach had seemed to double in size in a way it hadn't for her first pregnancy. "My father and Uncle Victor are already arguing over names for your first child. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Looking over her shoulder at Maddy, Nicole smiled. "I love your family."

"Our family," Maddy said seriously. "It's about time that you're officially part of it, too. Stephan should have married you the first time around. Uncle Victor should have never gotten involved."

"He meant well," Nicole defended her future father-in-law.

"He was wrong to try to break you up. At least he finally apologized." Maddy placed a hand on her stomach as her baby kicked. "If you ask him, he still says he did it because he cares about you and thought his son needed time to grow up. I hope I don't ever meddle in my children's lives like that."

"You? Meddle? Never," Nicole said, tongue in cheek. In a more serious tone, she continued, "It was easy to forgive Victor. He did it out of love. You have no idea how lucky you

are that you have a family who cares so much about each other.”

Maddy made a sympathetic face. “You have your brother, Dominic, and his wife. They both love you. You’ve mended your relationship with your mother. You have family who loves you—today all you’re doing is doubling the number of them.”

Nicole cocked her head to one side.

“Okay, quadrupling them,” Maddy amended. “You know what I mean.”

“I do.” Turning to face the mirror again, Nicole tucked a loose lock back into place. “You’ll never know how grateful I am to your family. You not only gave me Stephan, but you also brought my brother back into my life. I want to cry every time I think about him walking me down the aisle. This whole day is better than I ever dared dream it could be. I might throw up.” With a shy smile, Nicole said, “Is every bride this nervous? Are they all afraid to wake up and discover it was a dream?”

“You cannot vomit on a dress that beautiful.” Maddy chuckled. “And don’t worry. This is real. If it were your dream it wouldn’t have been postponed a day.”

Nicole turned, clasping her hands nervously in front of her. “I understood why Stephan asked me to. He couldn’t let his cousins leave upset.” Nicole looked out the window. “He brought them all back. Even Gio. I heard he flew in this morning.”

“He would have returned last night, but he and Julia had quarreled. Looks like they made up because she came back with him.”

Nicole smoothed the skirt of her gown. “I really like her.”

“And?”

“And he looks happy when he’s with her.”

“And?”

Nicole shook her head in confusion.

Maddy gave her an impish grin and a triumphant wiggle. “You can say it—I was right about her.”

Nicole laughed delicately and nodded in concession. “You were definitely right. She’s probably still a little afraid of you since you practically kidnapped her to introduce her to me, but your idea that helping Gio and his brothers find love might bring them back to the family seems to be working. At least with Gio.”

A light knock on the door announced the arrival of the other women in Nicole’s bridal party, each dressed in similarly colored dresses of different lengths and styles.

Abby Corisi rushed over and hugged her sister-in-law. “You look stunning.”

Abby’s sister, Lil Walton, followed suit and gave Nicole a bone-crushing embrace. “I didn’t think I could be happier than I was at my wedding, but I will probably bawl through this whole ceremony. Every time I think about you almost losing Stephan this summer, I get goose bumps. I mean, to have gone through so much and then ...”

“Lil,” several of the women in the room said in unison to halt her from saying more, then realized what they had done and burst into laughter.

Lil stepped back and smiled sheepishly. “What I mean to say is—enjoy every moment of today. You two have earned it.”

Nicole chuckled. She’d grown to love Lil’s impulsive bouts of honesty. She looked around the room and grateful tears came to her eyes. After a lonely childhood, to be part of this large and loving family was more than she’d ever dared wish for. She hugged Lil tightly. “I knew what you meant, and thank you.”

Lil plopped onto the chaise lounge beside Maddy. “So, about our bet. I see only one of the Andrade cousins brought a date. Was she anyone’s? Alethea and I planted an IT ex-swimsuit model we thought would be perfect for Gio, but apparently he’d already met—what’s her name again? Julia?”

“Yes, Julia,” said Abby. “I spoke to her this morning and she and Gio are engaged. No ring yet, and they don’t plan to announce anything until after the wedding, but isn’t that exciting?” Then she looked at her sister and asked, “What do you mean, ‘planted an IT person’?”

Lil looked away at the ceiling as she said, “We didn’t do anything illegal. We just made a few phone calls. Cogent had an opening. If everyone else’s online résumés disappeared, is that so bad?” Lil’s expression turned skeptical. “Are you honestly telling me that you didn’t plant anyone?”

Nicole jumped in with a smile. “Engaged. I knew it would happen fast for them the moment I saw them together. But don’t try to look all innocent, Abby. You had to have planted someone. Even Maddy and I did. Although we didn’t think Gio would be the first one to cave. We found an amazing woman who is going to school to work with young children and has a chauffeur’s license. We thought she’d be perfect for Nick, but she was transferred to another department of Cogent soon after being hired.”

“Marie and I thought Nick would be the easiest one, too,” Abby finally admitted. “We gave his normal secretary a position at Corisi Enterprises and sent over someone we loved. She was efficient and adorable but she was transferred also. I’ve spoken to her, though, since then and she says she loves her new job. I think we all will have to be more subtle with our next one.”

Lil snapped her fingers. “So Julia was an independent choice. Looks like none of us won this one.”

Maddy stood and crossed to the window. She looked down at Gio and Julia standing with her father. Nick, Luke, and Max were mingling with the other guests. Her heart swelled with hope. “I’d count this as a win for all of us.”

Nicole joined her by the window and nodded. “I know exactly what you mean.”

Meeting Nicole’s eyes, Maddy said, “I just wish I’d been able to convince their mother to come. She seemed interested

when I told her about Julia. I thought she'd like to know her son had finally met someone."

Abby joined them. "You didn't tell me that you went to see Gio's mother. How did that go? I thought you said she and your family didn't get along well."

Maddy shrugged sadly. "They don't. I wish I knew why. I told her that Stephan and I were actively trying to mend our relationship with her sons. I'd hoped she would join them here this weekend."

Nicole said, "I don't know, Maddy. I'm not sure she wants the family back together."

Maddy raised her chin stubbornly. "I disagree. She invited me to come see her again. I don't know what happened between her and my uncles, but she definitely wanted to hear more about our bet."

With a gasp, Nicole raised a hand to her mouth. "You told her?"

"I thought she might want to help," Maddy said defensively. "Luke says that his mother has always felt like an outsider in our family. She needs to know that we trust her."

Nicole looked down at the wedding party again and said softly, "I hope you know what you're doing, Maddy."

Confidently, Maddy said, "I do." She turned away from the window and said, "How are we on time?"

Abby said, "We should start heading down now if we want any pictures before the ceremony."

As they gathered up their accessories, Nicole walked over to her soon-to-be sister and said, "Maddy, this is your family. I don't mean to question how you deal with them."

Maddy hugged Nicole and said, "No, it's our family. You've been an Andrade for a while now—today simply makes it legal. I understand why you don't trust people, Nicole, but I'm right about this. Trust me. Patrice Stanfield needs to know we care about her. Then she'll come around."

Nicole glanced back over her shoulder at the window and said, “I hope you’re right, Maddy. I really hope you’re right.

The End

*Read on for an Excerpt from Home to Me, Book 2 of the
Andrades*

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*Look for a linked series set in the same world, written by Jeannette Winters (my sister).

You won't have to read her series to enjoy mine, but it sure will make it more fun. Characters will appear in both series.

[Author Jeannette Winters](#)

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Book 2: Table for Two

Book 3: You & Me Make Three

Book 4: Virgin for the Fourth Time

Book 5: His for Five Nights

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About the Author

Ruth Cardello was born the youngest of 11 children in a small city in northern Rhode Island. She spent her young adult years moving as far away as she could from her large extended family. She lived in Boston, Paris, Orlando, New York—then came full circle and moved back to Rhode Island. She now happily lives one town over from the one she was born in. For her, family trumped the warmer weather and international scene.

She was an educator for 20 years, the last 11 as a kindergarten teacher. When her school district began cutting jobs, Ruth turned a serious eye toward her second love—writing and has never been happier. When she's not writing, you can find her chasing her children around her small farm, riding her horses, or connecting with her readers online.

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Andrades*

Excerpt from Home to Me

Book 2 of the Andrades

Nick Andrade:

Sexy, charming, bad boy. He's never been a one woman man, but he's willing to give it a try every Saturday with Rena.

Rena Sander:

Confident, caring, a woman who plays by the rules. She's never been in love, and thinks keeping sex with Nick contained to one day a week will protect her heart.

He's the hot fantasy she's always craved.

She's the only woman he'd consider reforming for.

When their relationship is exposed and they must defend it, will these two lovers discover that home is in each other's arms?

Chapter One

“You can’t stop me—don’t get hurt trying to,” Nick Andrade warned as he moved to sidestep Rena, his brother’s secretary, for a second time.

Her chest bounced beneath her thin silk blouse and her hands went angrily to her hips, momentarily distracting Nick. Rena had always been a twelve on his one-to-ten scale. He preferred blondes as a general rule, but she was his exception. “I’m not letting you by. Gio is on an important international call.”

“I don’t care.”

“That’s exactly why you’re staying out here with me.”

As she blocked him, daring him to test her resolve, he felt his blood rush downward and was reminded why she was trouble and always had been.

Too vividly, he recalled another day when a younger Rena had stood before him in almost exactly the same pose. Gio had just started working full-time at his family’s oil company, Cogent, and he had asked Nick to pick up papers from his friend Kane. Nick had agreed even though it was a long drive. He’d only been home for a day and had already had a row with his mother, so any excuse to get out, even going to Sag Harbor, had been a welcome reprieve.

Rena had opened the door to her family’s home dressed in shorts and T-shirt emblazoned with her college’s name, taken one look at him, put her hands on her hips, and said, “Nick, I’m surprised you’re still alive.”

Her shirt had hugged her young breasts, and the long expanse of thigh exposed by her shorts had temporarily wiped all sense from his head. Yep, trouble. She was Kane’s little sister—even called herself an honorary Andrade because of all the time she’d spent with them while growing up.

Practically part of the family.

Forbidden.

“Rena, a pleasure to see you, as always. Gio asked me to pick up a folder.”

Rena had nodded. “Kane said he left something in the den in case you came by. Would you like to come in?”

He’d shaken his head. He’d never liked being at the Sander’s house. Gio had spent most of his vacations there, but Nick would rather have had needles stuck beneath his fingernails than spend five minutes with Rena’s parents. They were always smiling, always asking about things that were none of their business, and offering advice when it was clearly not requested or welcome.

Gio had claimed they did it because they cared. Nick had seen it as a genetic defect, and one they had passed down to their children.

“I’ll wait here,” Nick had answered and leaned against the doorjamb.

“Suit yourself,” she’d said and walked back into the house. When she’d returned she’d held up the folder but hadn’t immediately handed it over to him. “Gio was upset when he saw the photos of you and your friends jumping out of that helicopter to ski in Vail.”

“Everything upsets Gio ...”

“He worries about you. He thinks you’re going to get yourself killed with one of your stunts. I think so, too.”

Nick had snatched the folder easily out of Rena’s hand. “It’s called having fun, Rena. You should try it sometime. Oh, wait, Mommy and Daddy would never give you permission, would they?”

“My parents would support whatever I wanted to do.”

With a whistle, Nick had mocked her. “Then come to Martha’s Vineyard with me this weekend. I just got my pilot’s license. I’m flying a bunch of friends up to our beach house. Even Stephan is coming. It’s going to be wild.”

“I can’t. I have finals next week.”

“I’m sure you could blow off studying this one time and still pass your classes.”

“I probably could, but I’m not going to. I have a four point oh.”

“Why bother when a job will be handed to you as soon as you graduate?”

“My grades are important to me.”

“You mean, they’re important to your parents.”

“That too. I don’t like disappointing them.”

“My God, you sound like you’re twelve.”

Rena’s face had reddened and she’d spat, “Fuck you.”

He’s tossed her a lopsided grin. “Thanks for the offer, but I don’t do virgins.”

“You’re such an asshole, Nick.”

Nick had waved the folder, chuckled, and said, “It’s what the ladies love about me.”

Rena had turned and slammed the door in a glorious huff, leaving Nick standing outside, shaking his head in bemusement. He loved the wild look in her eyes when her temper flared, and that he was the only one who could make her that angry. She was innocence and fire, and he’d spent many nights wanting to intimately explore both sides of her.

He’d never pursued her, though. She’d started working for Gio after college, and he’d promised his brother he’d stay away from her. He couldn’t forget her, though, as hard as he tried. Shit, she even sent him a card for his birthday every year.

Lately it was the only one he received. He’d never thanked her for any of them. Honestly, he half hoped each year would be the last year he’d get one, but they kept coming. They made him angry for reasons he couldn’t fully understand. Who the hell takes the time to remember an adult’s birthday?

She’d taken the “nice girl next door” act too far. All her boyfriends were educated, well dressed, and boring as hell.

She was, too, when she was with them. He'd bet none of them knew Rena was a sucker for a dare, or that she ate before she went out because she wanted to appear satisfied by a salad.

They might not know her quirks, but they'd experienced something he hadn't—the taste of those lips. They knew the way she moaned when she was just about to come. With his heart beating wildly in his chest and adrenaline rushing through his veins, Nick allowed himself the luxury of imagining how she would look in his bed after hours of being fucked.

He met her eyes and came crashing back to the present. *What the hell am I doing?* He'd come to confront his brother, and doing so while sporting a hard-on was not in his plans. "Gio needs to hear what I have to say. It's a hell of a lot more important than whatever's he's doing, which I'm sure is promising to blow whoever's on that call to land his latest deal."

"Are you drunk?" Rena asked, her forehead creasing with concern.

"No," he said impatiently. *Just an idiot who needs to ignore how tightly your skirt is hugging your beautiful ass.*

She leaned in and sniffed. He knew that concerned look well. He could have told her he'd stopped drinking completely when he'd returned from his cousin's wedding, but he didn't explain himself to anyone. "Get out of my way."

Her chin raised a notch and her eyes narrowed. "No."

Nick had never touched a woman out of anger, and he never would. Still, her show of loyalty to his brother fueled his anger. He knew one method that would get her to retreat and he wasn't above using it. He gave her a blatant, appreciative once-over and wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. "I can think of something that would stop me."

She flipped her hair over one shoulder and shook her head. "You're trying to make me angry."

Nick stepped closer to her. "Anger isn't what I'd make you feel." He ran a finger lightly down her tense jaw and over the

wild pulse in her neck. Instead of turning tail and running, she held his eyes, and Nick inhaled harshly. The air between them throbbed with a desire that neither would admit to. Her eyes dilated, and her lips parted just enough that he could imagine slipping his tongue between them and tasting her.

She bit her lower lip gently between her teeth. He groaned audibly and stepped closer, his mouth hovering above hers. For no more than a heartbeat or two, he forgot why he'd initiated this exchange. He was just a man who was about to kiss a woman he wanted, one he'd denied himself for as long as he could remember.

The door behind her flew open. "What are you doing here, Nick?"

Rena's eyes searched his in confusion. Then she looked away, a slight blush spreading across her cheeks. Nick raised his head and squared his shoulders. "We need to talk, Gio."

Rena addressed Gio. "Should I call Luke?"

"No," Gio said in an irritatingly authoritative tone.

"Wise choice," Nick said over Rena's head. "You won't want him to hear what I have to say."

Gio raised one mocking eyebrow, then motioned for Nick to come into his office. Anger rushed through Nick. *He doesn't take me seriously. He never has. That is about to change.*

Rena put a hand on Nick's arm when he moved to step around her. The light touch was fire on his skin, painful and pleasurable at the same time. In a volume so low only he would hear her words, she said, "Whatever happened, don't let it come between you. You're family. There is nothing more important than that."

"You don't know what this is about."

"No, but I know Gio."

"Your concern for him is touching." Nick stepped away from her and through the door his brother held open for him.

Just before the door closed, he thought he heard Rena whisper, "It's not him I'm worried about."

* * *

Rena Sander paced the carpeted floor in front of her desk. Nick Andrade knew exactly how to get her blood boiling. Yes, she found him attractive, but a woman would have to be dead not to. The Andrade men had all been blessed with good looks. Each had eyes as dark as coal and strong features that would have done any Roman statue proud. Well over six feet with a naturally muscular build, and consistently dressed in casual but expensive international designer clothing, Nick always looked like he'd just finished a cover shoot for *GQ*.

He used his good looks to get what he wanted, and today that had meant getting around her. How far would he have gone to achieve his goal? And would his ploy have worked? Rena was glad she'd never know. Whatever feelings she'd once had for him were in the past. As she'd grown up, they'd fallen by the wayside, as all teenage crushes should.

Now was not the time to start asking what-ifs.

Plus, dating Nick was probably the only way she could lose her job at Cogent, and she didn't want to. It wasn't a perfect job. Gio had a reputation for being demanding, impatient, and often blunt when a softer touch was warranted, but Rena wasn't bothered by his moods. He'd even fired her a few times since she'd started there. She hadn't taken him seriously, and he'd always called back to apologize and rehire her.

Job security was a perk of being his best friend's little sister, but she worked hard to make sure she deserved to be there. No one worked longer hours or was more dedicated to the company than she was, and she was proud of how she could keep the office functioning seamlessly during Gio's many business trips.

Kane teased her that she only wanted to work there because it kept her in the middle of any and all Andrade drama. Rena would have denied it, but she didn't like to lie. Gio and his brothers needed her. *When someone needs you, you help them—whether or not they ask you to.*

It's practically our family motto.

Permission to assist appreciated, but not necessary.

Over the eighteen or so years she'd known them, she'd watched the four Andrade brothers grow from sad boys into angry men. They each hid their scars in different ways, but they didn't fool Rena. Yes, they had lived a privileged life that, on the surface, appeared ideal, but Rena knew the truth of how they'd been raised. Between their workaholic father and their viciously insecure and spiteful mother, they'd been deprived of what Rena considered any semblance of a healthy home. They craved love and understanding like half-wilted flowers crave water.

Gio: the angry family patriarch. His word was law and his temper was short. Until he met his fiancée, Julia, he'd hidden himself away in his work. The change in him had been heartwarming. More than ever before, it made Rena wish the same happiness for the others.

Nick: the unredeemable and notorious playboy. Young, rich, and gorgeous. He was photographed more than many movie stars were, and could be counted on to consistently provide front-page-worthy scandalous photos. His dating practices were legendary—heiresses to porn stars—and if half of what the papers claimed he'd done were true, he'd have a lot of explaining to do if he ever made it to the gates of Heaven.

Luke: the rich surgeon and the glue of the Andrade family. He called his brothers daily and smoothed over whatever was brewing. He reminded her of her brother, Kane.

And Max: the youngest, who had branched off to make his own fortune in the hotel and casino business. He was the most private of the four boys and the one Rena knew the least. In general, he kept himself outside of all family drama.

Rena reached for the phone and called the brother she'd been told not to. "Luke?"

"Rena," Luke answered warmly. "I'm about to go into surgery. Can we talk later?"

"Nick is here," Rena said in a rush.

“That’s good. I’ve talked to him about getting more involved at Cogent. I’m glad he’s doing it.”

Rena began pacing again with the headset in her hand. “I don’t believe his visit is business related. Nick said he had something he needed to say to Gio and he didn’t look happy about it.”

“Shit.” Luke sighed. “I can’t come now. Do you have any idea what it’s about?”

“I was hoping you did.”

“Nick has been spending time with our mother since she had that episode.”

“You mean her heart attack?”

“I haven’t seen her health records, so I can’t say for sure. It might have been a severe panic attack.”

“You think she lied?”

Luke sighed again. “No. She wouldn’t go that far, but she could exaggerate the situation. She hasn’t been the same since we attended Stephan’s wedding without her. I don’t know what she has against Victor and Alessandro, but she can’t handle the idea of any of us spending time with either of them. I’ve tried to talk to her about it, but she won’t discuss it.”

“So you think she said something to Nick?”

“I don’t know. She’s upset that Gio isn’t speaking to her right now. Maybe it’s about that.”

“They had an argument right after the wedding, didn’t they?”

“That’s what I hear. Gio was furious with her for trying to pay off Julia.”

“I still don’t understand why she would do that. Julia makes Gio happy. Who wouldn’t want her son to find love?”

“She would tell you she does whatever is necessary to protect us. For some reason that included keeping Julia and Gio apart.”

“I don’t think Patrice likes you and your brothers getting along the way you have since Stephan’s wedding. I wouldn’t put it past her to have faked an *episode* just to draw attention back to herself.”

“Hey,” Luke reprimanded.

“Sorry, I know she’s your mother. I just don’t understand her. She has four amazing sons and more money than she could spend in ten lifetimes. Why isn’t she happy?”

“I wish I knew,” Luke said sadly. “She’s heading to a dark place. I hope she doesn’t take Nick with her.”

Rena stopped and chewed her lip. “I could talk to him.”

“Listen, I know you care. I wouldn’t tell you this if I didn’t consider you one of us, but don’t get involved this time. I have a feeling this is going to get really ugly before it gets better. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Rena laughed even though she found little humor in the situation. “You’re the second Andrade to say that to me today. Nick said almost those exact words a few minutes ago. You should have seen his face when he said it. Something really upset him today. I wish I knew what it was.”

“Don’t do it, Rena.”

“What?”

“Don’t try to help Nick. He’s right. You’ll only get hurt.”

“I wish the four of you could always be as happy as you looked right after you came back from the island wedding.”

With a sigh, Luke said, “I have to go. Rena, promise me you’ll let them sort this out themselves. I have some time late this afternoon. I’ll come by to smooth over whatever blowup they have this morning. Stay out of it.”

“I will.”

“You’re not a good liar, Rena.”

Rena hung up the phone and squared her shoulders. *Maybe not, but if Nick and Gio wanted me to stay out of this, they would have had their spat away from the office.*

Rena placed her hand on the door to Gio's office and took a deep breath.

I will not stand back and do nothing while they tear each other apart.

Sorry, Patrice. Whatever you're up to is not going to work. Not this time.

Not on my watch.

Chapter Two

“I went to see Mother this morning,” Nick said slowly, watching his brother’s reaction. Of his three brothers, Gio was the most difficult to talk to about anything. Luke could always be relied on to provide a sympathetic ear. Max gave his unfettered opinion, when he cared enough to have one. Talking to Gio was more like trying to cross a field of land mines while blindfolded. It was impossible to guess which word would set Gio off, but an explosion was inevitable.

Gio took his self-appointed role as head of the family seriously—too seriously. It had been the root of many disagreements between them over the years, even if recently they’d called a truce.

A truce that had ended abruptly that morning when Nick had caught his mother crying and had asked her what was wrong. Her answer had infuriated him.

“How is she?” Gio asked smoothly, as if he were inquiring about the weather.

“Weak. The doctor has her on a monitor while they try a new medication.”

“I hope he finds what she needs.” Gio’s comment held just enough sarcasm to renew Nick’s earlier anger.

“It would be nice if you pretended to care.”

Gio walked over to his desk, sat on the edge of it, and crossed his arms in front of him. “I do, but I’m not convinced she’s as ill as she says she is.”

“I met with her doctor yesterday. His story matched hers. Is he lying? Am I? What the hell is your problem?”

Gio rubbed his chin with one hand. “She has no history of heart disease and the timing was ... convenient.”

“Don’t you mean inconvenient for you? Afraid if it’s true it’ll cut down on the time you can spend with your fiancée?”

Gio stood up and dropped his hands to his side. “Leave Julia out of this.”

Shaking his head in disgust, Nick said, “I’d like to, but from what I hear she’s part of the problem. You may not care what she says to Mother, but I do.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t believe you, but that doesn’t matter. I came here because you and Julia are upsetting Mother and it’s affecting her health. You need to go see her and apologize.”

Between gritted teeth, Gio said, “I have nothing to apologize for.”

Nick crossed the room and stood nose to nose with his brother. “I could give you a list that goes back years, but right now I’m referring to how you told her she’s driving all of us away and will die alone.”

Gio’s face went white with anger. “I said that because she ...” He groaned. “Taken out of context it sounds bad, but ...”

“Gio, you said it to an elderly woman who just had a heart attack. There is no context in which that doesn’t make you look like a fucking asshole.”

Gio rubbed one of his temples. “You don’t know the whole story. I didn’t tell you what she said to Julia.”

“I don’t give a shit what she said. I don’t care about your little security girlfriend. I care that finally getting laid has you so turned around you can’t see how you’re hurting our mother.”

“The only reason you’re still standing is because I know what it’s like to be fed lies by her. I feel for you, but if you value your life you won’t mention Julia again. Mother doesn’t need your protection, trust me.”

“So you won’t go see her?”

“Not until I’m ready.”

Nick shook his head in disgust. “I knew you were a heartless bastard when you threatened to have father’s mistress

thrown out of her home if she ever contacted us. As long as you get what you want, it doesn't matter who you hurt, does it? Mother wanted to confront her, but you wouldn't let her have that closure, would you? It all has to be on your terms, doesn't it?"

"How long have you known about Leora?"

"I always suspected Father had someone on the side. No one in the oil business needs to spend that much time in Venice. It was why I offered to go with you to collect his body. I wasn't surprised by what you found there. But I was disappointed you didn't think the rest of us deserved the truth."

"You were young ..."

"I'm two years younger than you are, Gio. Not a child. You didn't keep us in the dark to protect us—you took advantage of the situation. While Mother grieved, you took over the company. She was so distraught she didn't realize she was handing over the reigns to someone who had no intention of giving them back"

"Is that what she's telling you? You're forgetting I made you a full partner from the beginning. You chose not be involved. You could've joined me at any time. I've kept a goddamned office staffed for you for almost a decade."

"An empty gesture. I tried to work with you when Father first passed. You shut me down every chance you got. Do you know what it was like to speak at a meeting only to have you correct everything I said?"

"You had no idea what you were talking about. I had worked my way up in the company so I knew what needed to be done. You came in with no experience. I couldn't let you —"

"Fuck it up? Or learn enough to be your competition? You don't fool me, Gio. You wanted full control and you got it."

The door of the office opened and Rena strode directly up to the men. "I can hear the two of you in my office. Is everything okay?"

“This is none of your concern, Rena,” Gio said without looking away from Nick.

Planting herself directly between them, Rena put her hands on her hips and said, “Yes, it is. I love both of you and that makes it my concern.”

Nick put a hand on Rena’s shoulder. “We’re fine, Rena.”

Gio put his hand on Rena’s other shoulder and snarled at Nick. “Get your hand off my secretary.”

Nick said, “She may work for you, but you don’t own her.”

“True, but I won’t let you use her as another way to piss me off. Rena, stay the hell away from him. Understand me?”

“If Rena and I ever get together it will have nothing to do with you.”

“Nick, don’t do something I’ll have to kill you for.”

“Stop it. Both of you.” Rena looked back and forth between the two of them and shrugged their hands off. “First of all, I don’t belong to anyone, and no one could ever tell me who I could or couldn’t see. Second of all, there is no risk of anything happening with Nick because he’s practically my brother. Now, what is really going on here?”

Nick met Gio’s eyes over Rena’s head. “Nothing new.”

Gio glared back at him. “I’m not doing this. I’m not getting sucked back into the lies.”

“I hoped I could talk you into doing the right thing, Gio, but if you can’t be kind to your mother when she’s fighting for her life then stay the hell away from her. She doesn’t need your version of love.”

“I told her what she needed to hear.”

“Don’t do it again, Gio. Your reign over this family is over. It ends now.”

Gio barked a humorless laugh. “Are you threatening me?”

Rena said, “I’m sure that’s not what Nick meant.”

With a steely voice, Nick said, “Don’t test me on this, Gio. You won’t win.”

Gio ran his hand through his hair. “Nick, you’re letting Mother get in your head. This is what she does. She twists things around to suit her agenda. You can’t believe anything she says.”

“But I can trust you? You’re honest with me? Tell me, how long were you going to wait to tell the rest of us we have a half sister?”

His question hung heavy in the room. Gio waved a hand in frustration. “I planned to tell you when we returned from the wedding, but ...”

“Really? It’s hard to believe anything you say.”

“I didn’t know about her until I went to see Father’s mistress in Venice.”

Rena asked, “You have a half sister? Does Luke know?”

Gio’s jaw tightened and his face went red with anger. “No. When we returned from Stephan’s wedding, we received the call that Mother had had a heart attack and I decided to wait.” He clenched and unclenched his hands at his sides. “I didn’t want to upset her.”

Nick shook his head in disgust. “I can’t stomach another moment of this. Stay away from me, Gio. Stay away from all of us or I will take from you the only thing you’ve ever cared about—Cogent.”

* * *

“Nick ...” Rena said, but Nick was already walking out the office door. As she rushed to follow him, she heard Gio mumbling behind her.

“What the fuck would he do? He doesn’t even know where his office is.”

Rena sprinted down the hallway after Nick. Years of high school track paid off as she beat him to the elevator door. “Don’t go ...”

He looked down at her, and the pain in his eyes chased the rest of what she was going to say clear out of her head. Normally he hid behind sarcasm and empty flirtation, but in that moment she saw the man behind the playboy façade, and the sadness in him ripped at her heart. “Stay away from me, Rena. I’m not in a good place.”

She took his hand in hers. “That’s when you need friends the most. Come back and try talking to Gio again. You’re brothers. You can figure this out.”

“I wish it were that simple, Rena, but your loyalty to him is misplaced.”

“I don’t believe that for a minute.”

“Then you are a poor judge of character.” Nick tried to pull his hand away from hers, but Rena held on tighter. She had to make him see that walking away wasn’t the answer. When it came to why they didn’t get along, neither brother was entirely blameless.

Nick was right: Gio was brutally honest and most comfortable when he was fully in control of a situation. He didn’t delegate well and didn’t have the patience to wait while others worked out a problem he had already solved. She didn’t doubt Nick’s version of what it was like to speak at a meeting run by Gio. But she also knew Gio would do anything for his brothers, and that Nick’s criticism had hurt him, even if he didn’t show it.

Gio was right: Nick hadn’t been ready to run the company. Yes, he’d graduated with a business degree from a good university, but he hadn’t spent enough time at Cogent to make informed decisions.

Gio should have let Nick make mistakes—and learn from them.

Nick should have worked with Gio instead of turning the situation into a rivalry. Nick could be successful at whatever he chose to do, but maybe he’d have to come out from Gio’s shadow to do it. Just as Luke and Max had.

The problem with Gio and Nick was they were more alike than either would acknowledge.

Both too proud.

Too angry.

Too unable to see past the faults in each other.

“I have very good instincts when it comes to people. That’s why I know you didn’t mean what you said about taking Cogent.”

“You think I couldn’t do it?”

“No, I know you’d never intentionally hurt your brother. Just like I know you’d never hurt me.”

The expression on Nick’s face softened. He raised a hand and tucked a lock of hair gently behind Rena’s ear. “Take off your rose-colored glasses, Rena. You think everyone has some good in them, but we don’t. Not Gio. Not me.”

“That’s not true, Nick. You came here today because you care about your mother. That’s admirable ...” *Even if misguided.*

“Stay out of this, Rena. There is no Hallmark card for a family as fucked up as mine is.”

Classic Nick. Hurt and lashing out. That got others to back off, but Rena knew him too well. “You can’t leave things the way you did. Go back in there and—”

“No. We were both clear enough.”

Rena pulled Nick closer, holding both of his arms as she tried to reach past his anger. “No, you weren’t. You didn’t tell him you love him. You didn’t give him time to explain his side of the story. If you did—”

Nick pulled back from Rena abruptly, his eyes burning with anger Rena couldn’t understand. “Stay away from me.”

There has to be something I can say that will make him see this isn’t irreparable. “Luke said he’d come by later today.”

“You called him?”

Rena nodded.

“Of course you did. You talk to him more than I do. I’m surprised you’ve never dated.”

“Me and Luke? No. I don’t think of him that way.”

“Are you sure? The two of you seem to find reasons to slip away to be alone whenever we’re all together.”

“He’s funny. And we’re usually talking about—” She stopped before she finished the sentence. She’d almost said, “You.” But Nick would take that the wrong way.

She took Nick’s hand again and said, “I know you don’t like to discuss your family with anyone, but maybe this time you should. I could help you—if you let me.”

Nick shook his head. “No.”

Rena held on tight, advanced and persisted. “Why not?”

“Because I ...” He pulled her into his arms and ravaged her mouth with his. It wasn’t how she’d imagined he’d kiss. It was bold and hungry. It may have been meant as a warning or as punishment, but it was too full of passion to be either. He held her face between his hands and plundered. At first she was too surprised to kiss him back, but his touch sparked a heat that rose within her.

This was the kiss she’d always imagined they could share. It had a sizzle, a wildness that swept through both of them, making time and location irrelevant. All that mattered was his mouth, his touch, this fire.

His hands moved down over her, molding her to him with a roughness that only heightened the heat between them. She arched herself against him and felt his erection pulsing against her stomach. His lips left hers and claimed her neck, one hot kiss after another, until all Rena could hear was her own heavy breathing.

And she panicked.

She shoved him back from her and said, “What the hell are you doing, Nick?”

His expression was dark and angry even though his eyes raged with need. He glanced over her shoulder and Rena's confusion grew. She demanded, "Is he there? Don't use me to get back at Gio. I deserve better than that."

He frowned at her accusation but didn't deny it. Without saying a word, he turned and walked away.

One of the secretaries from marketing paused when she saw Rena standing in the hallway and asked, "Rena? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"What are you doing?"

"What?"

"You look like you're waiting for someone."

"No," Rena said with a shake of her head. "Just thinking."

Holy shit, what was that?

End of Excerpt from Home To Me, Book 2 of the Andrades

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*Read on for an Excerpt from Maid for the Billionaire, Book 1
of the Legacy Collection*

Excerpt from Maid for the Billionaire

Book 1 of the Legacy Collection

Available at all major eBook retailers for FREE!

Dominic Corisi knew instantly that Abigail Dartley was just the distraction he was looking for, especially since having her took a bit more persuading than he was used to. So when business forces him to fly to China, he decides to take her with him, but on his terms. No promises. No complications. Just sex.

Abby has always been the responsible one. She doesn't believe in taking risks; especially when it comes to men – until she meets Dominic. He's both infuriating and intoxicating, a heady combination. Their trip to China revives a long forgotten side of Abby, but also reveals a threat to bring down Dominic's company.

With no time to explain her actions, Abby must either influence the outcome of his latest venture and save his company or accept her role as his mistress and leave his fate to chance. Does she love him enough to risk losing him for good?

Chapter One

By dying now, his father had won again. *That old bastard.*

Dominic Corisi slammed the door of his black Bugatti Veyron and stepped onto the sun baked Boston sidewalk without giving the million-dollar vehicle a backward glance. The joy of owning it was dead along with his desire to answer the incessant ring of the cell phone he'd ignored since yesterday. Rather than turning it off, he'd muffled the noise by burying the device deep within a coat pocket, maintaining the connection to his life like a distant beacon.

Despite the oppressive heat, he paused at the bottom stair of his old brownstone. There was nothing spectacular about it, outside of its location near the upbeat Newbury Street. If he remembered correctly, its rooms were small and the main staircase had a creak that he never did get around to fixing. It was nothing like the sprawling mansions he now owned in various countries around the world.

But it was the closest thing he had to a home.

His phone rang with a tone he couldn't ignore. *Jake*. His second in command would simply call again, killing whatever chance Dominic had of finding a moment of peace inside those brick walls. "Corisi," he barked into the phone.

"Dominic, glad I caught you," Jake Walton said smoothly, as if he hadn't unsuccessfully rung twenty times in the last two days. That was Jake, calm and professional, even in the storm of hostile takeovers. Nothing fazed the man.

Normally, Dominic appreciated his even temper, but today it grated on him. Maybe the forty or so hours without sleep were beginning to catch up with him. He fought an impulse to toss his phone over the metal railing. The world wasn't the orderly, rational place Jake liked to organize it into. It was messy. It was ugly. And, most recently, it lacked justice.

"How is Boston?"

The inane question almost sent Dominic over the edge. “How do you think?”

It was probably too much to hope that Jake’s uncharacteristic silence signaled an end to a conversation Dominic wished he had avoided.

“We need to discuss the China contract. The Minister of Commerce is expecting to meet with you tomorrow to cement the details. This is your dream, Dominic. By next week, Corisi Enterprises will be a major global player. What do you want me to tell the minister?”

“I don’t know,” Dominic said wearily.

Jake made a sound somewhere between a choke and a cough, then was speechless—a revealing response for a man who handled irate international diplomats without missing a step. He was the fixer and navigated the unexpected with ease. Until now.

Poor Jake. Nothing in their shared history had prepared either of them for Dominic’s sudden desire to withdraw from the world. The creators of financial empires didn’t take sudden vacations and they most certainly didn’t hide, especially not after having laid the groundwork for the single greatest business venture of the century. Bill Gates himself had called last week to discuss the ramifications of the negotiations.

“Jake, I need to drop off the radar for about a week. Why don’t you take over the China contract?”

“Okay ...” Jake said awkwardly. In another situation, Jake’s loss of composure would have been amusing.

“Can you handle it or not?” Dominic challenged. He could barely think past the throbbing of his headache.

Maybe coming to Boston was a mistake. It had been here, at seventeen, that he’d walked away from his inheritance and waited tables to fund the search for his mother. Here, in this very brownstone, that he’d cultivated a hatred for a father who had denied both involvement and interest in the disappearance of his wife.

Jake's voice slammed Dominic back into the present. "No problem. I've followed the progress you've made with the Chinese Investment Promotion Agency. They're eager. I'll clear my schedule and cover yours. Duhamel will forward all of your calls to me until further notice."

"Good."

"Dom ..." Jake hesitated. "It's normal to need time to grieve. You just lost your father."

A harsh laugh escaped Dominic. "Trust me, I'm not grieving his loss." He leaned a hip on the metal railing and looked up at the building he had instinctively returned to, searching for the man he'd once been and hoping to find something there that would shake off the immobilizing apathy he felt for all he had done since—high expectations for brick and antique wallpaper.

Jake said, "That's what worries me. No matter what your plans were or what he once did to you, he's gone now. You've got to let it go."

Jake was asking the impossible. Of course the past mattered. Sometimes it was the only thing that did. "Just do your job, Jake. If you can't handle it, tell me and I'll promote Priestly to help you."

For the second time since they had met at Harvard, Jake lost his temper. "That's bullshit, Dom. You want to send Priestly to China? Send him. You're absolutely right—you've made me a very rich man. I don't need this. But heed my warning: you won't be a billionaire for long if we both step away from the helm. A lot is riding on this contract. The lawsuits alone will freeze your assets if you screw this up. You invested too much of your own and you're playing with the big boys now. Governments are not very forgiving when it comes to last minute walk outs."

The speech should have shaken Dominic, but it barely breached the numbness that had settled in since he'd received the phone call from his father's lawyer. What did all the money matter anyway? He'd wasted fifteen years amassing an empire that would allow him to throw down a forced buyout

contract on his father's enormous mahogany desk. Dominic should have taken action years ago, but no level of prior success had felt like enough. He'd choreographed the day from both sides, building his company while undermining his father's, always working toward that one absolute win. Dominic had counted on his father's desperation finally forcing him to confess what had actually happened to his mother.

It was that loss he mourned today.

In its place was a carefully orchestrated set of instructions from his father's lawyer. No, it wasn't enough to simply disinherit his only son—Antonio Corisi had also included provisions in his will to ensure that Dominic had to attend the reading. He'd used Dominic's one weakness, his one regret, to reaffirm his control, even from the grave.

Jake coughed, reminding Dominic that a response was required. What could he say? As usual, Jake was correct in his assessment of the situation. Dominic had used his own wealth as well as that of his investors to back this venture. The risk had seemed worth it. The government contract would crack China's software market wide open for them while their global influence would double exponentially. It was a daring move that, if carefully implemented, could put Corisi Enterprises on a stratosphere of power few companies ever acquired—a goal that a week ago had seemed imperative.

Jake could handle the negotiations. Dominic had always been the one to charge forward, shaking the situation up and clearing the way. This time would be no different. Jake would merely take over a few documents earlier this time. Priestly was good at the local level, but he was no Jake.

“One week, Jake.” It was the closest to an apology Dominic was able to get out. He hoped it was enough.

Sounding more like an older brother than a business associate, Jake said, “Take two weeks if you need it. Just get your head together. I can wrap up the China contract, but it'll need your final signature and your presence. I'll do a press release today and ask the media to respect your need to mourn

in private; that should give you at least a few days before they descend.”

“Call Murdock.” *The man owes me a few favors.*

“Do you mean the Murdock? I thought he’d retired.”

Ah, there is the real difference between us. By not fighting in the trenches of financial warfare, Jake’s business associations had remained above reproach, but he lacked the backdoor connections to those seemingly innocuous individuals who wielded real international influence. Dominic casually gave Jake a number that many would have paid a small fortune to dial just once. “Men like Murdock don’t retire, they delegate from warmer climates. Tell him I don’t even want a good spin on this. It’s non-news. He’ll understand.”

Jake whistled softly in appreciation. “Is there anyone you don’t know?”

“Yes, you if you call me again today.”

Jake laughed, but they both knew it hadn’t been a joke. “Do yourself a favor, Dom ...” Jake continued in an unusually authoritative tone.

What now? Dominic sighed.

“Put down the Jack Daniels for a night and pick up one of those models you like to date. You’ll sleep better.”

Dominic gave a noncommittal grunt and hung up. *If only it were that easy.*

Chapter Two

Arms full of bed linens, Abby Dartley froze at the click of the front door opening. *Darn it.* She couldn't get caught here, especially in an oversized shirt and jeans instead of her sister's maid uniform. *Lil needs this job.* Cleaning the brownstone of a man who never actually occupied it had sounded like a relatively simple, albeit annoying, way to help her sister remain employed.

"Do not let anyone see you," Lil had pleaded between the fits of sneezes that had accompanied her low, but persistent fever. "They'll fire me in a second if they find out you went in my place."

"Can't you just call in?" Abby remembered suggesting hopefully.

"I already used my two allowed sick days for Colby." And then the tears had come.

A year ago, Abby would have let her sister add this lost job to the long string of employment she'd already tried and failed at and would have covered her expenses until she found a new job. They'd been through this cycle countless times, resulting only in Lil resenting Abby more with each passing year. The closeness they'd shared before the death of their parents was a distant, surreal memory.

Abby had considered asking Lil to move out, hoping that some separation would give Lil the independence she said she wanted, but that was before she'd held her new niece in her arms. It wasn't just about Lil anymore. Colby deserved a mother with a stable career and Lil was so close to having one. She was one semester from finishing her administrative assistant courses. Even when Colby's father had walked out at the news of his fatherhood, Lil hadn't crumbled. For the first time since they'd received the news of the accident that had claimed the lives of both their parents, Lil wasn't hiding from her responsibilities.

Colby had changed that, too.

It wasn't Lil's fault she'd caught the flu. Half the city seemed to be either recovering from it or succumbing to it. More importantly, it had been a long time since Lil had actually requested help, rather than merely grudgingly accepting it. Abby didn't want to put too much significance on such a miniscule connection, but she couldn't shake the hope that things could get better between them.

Her first impression of him as he stood in the entrance, unaware of her existence, was that he looked more tired than a man his age should. Dark circles were evident even against his olive complexion. His expensive suit did nothing to conceal the slump of his wide shoulders. According to Lil, he'd paid to have the brownstone cleaned on a weekly basis, but hadn't actually been there in over a decade. Something had brought him back and whatever it was, it had steamrolled right over him.

He looked up and through her as he crossed the foyer. "You can go now."

She considered following his weary command, but something held her immobile.

"Are you deaf? I said you can leave. Finish whatever you're doing tomorrow."

Mr. Armani sounded like an overtired child, although she was fairly certain he wouldn't appreciate the comparison. The wisest choice of action would have been to do as he said and leave before he had a chance to question her attire, but she couldn't.

He didn't look like someone who should be alone.

Was she simply projecting? Her friends often accused her of seeing good where there was none, but that was a hazard of her job. To be an effective middle school teacher, one had to see beyond the bravado. Abby taught English to non-native speakers, so she was often employed in the toughest schools in the city. She was used to defusing misdirected anger. Profanity was a cry for help. Harsh words often hid fear. Her patience

paid off. Students returned, year after year, to thank her for believing in them. For some, she knew she'd been the only one who had. But this wasn't her classroom and, in reality, she had no idea who this man was.

She could almost hear Lil's voice telling her some things were simply not her business and she'd be right. This man wouldn't welcome her nurturing any more than her sister did, but that didn't stop Abby's heart from going out to him.

She put the sheets on a table on one side of the hallway and said, "There are fresh towels upstairs. Why don't you go take a shower and I'll get some basic groceries from the corner store for you."

His back straightened and she caught her breath, reeling from the full impact of his attention. *God, he's beautiful.* His dark gray eyes raked over her, flashing with irritation and then something else. He cut the distance between them in a few short strides. A hint of alcohol reached her as he stopped mere inches from her. She tipped her head back to look up at him.

"Did Jake send you?" he asked as he assessed her. "You don't look like a model."

She blinked a few times in surprise as some of her sympathy for him faded. "And you don't smell like a man who should be wearing an Armani, but I wasn't going to mention it," she answered in a huff.

Her words must have stirred something in him; his shoulders squared and his eyes narrowed. This was a man who was not accustomed to people speaking back to him, but if he was trying to intimidate her, his nearness was creating the entirely wrong reaction in her body. Even in his rumpled suit, or maybe because of it, he was the sexiest man she'd ever seen in person. Men like this existed only on the large screen or in novels. She wanted to reach up and run a hand over the rough stubble on his cheek.

"I didn't say you were unattractive," he growled. "You're just not reed thin like the women I'm used to."

That's it. She put her hands on her hips and raised her eyebrows in a silent challenge.

Time suspended as their standoff continued. His look of annoyance was steeped with an expectation that she should try to appease him some way. She simply met his glare with her own, giving him time to replay his choice of words in his mind. He looked away first, a slight flush reddening his neck.

“Okay, that came out wrong.” He ran a frustrated hand through his thick black hair, leaving it slightly awry and sexier ... if that were even possible. He was already a twelve or thirteen on her one to ten scale, even after she deducted a few points for lack of social skills. A glint of fascination lit his dark eyes as something occurred to him. “Did you just tell me that I stink?”

There was nothing tired about the way he leaned down until their lips almost touched. The scent of him mixed with the dash of liquor and the combination was heady. He was all male, untamed and interested in more than her answer to his question. No man had ever looked at her with such intensity. His sexual energy demanded a response that her body seemed all too willing to deliver.

Abby fought down the urge to close the short distance between them. She'd lost too much to believe in anything that felt this good. She took a half a step back and raised a placating hand. “I wasn't quite that harsh.”

The corners of his mouth twitched in amusement. “Do you have any idea who I am?” he asked, somehow making the question sound more curious than pompous.

Perhaps his tragedy had brought him a bit of notoriety, but Abby wasn't one to watch much TV and, as usual, Lil had given her just the information she absolutely needed in a brief, stilted conversation that typified how strained their relationship had become.

“I'm hoping you're the man who owns this brownstone, otherwise I'm going to get in trouble for letting you in,” she said with some forced humor.

He didn't laugh. "You really don't know, do you?" His question sounded oddly hopeful.

Abby shrugged, but the hairs on the back of her neck tingled. What kind of man was relieved not to be recognized?

A criminal.

Crap.

Nice clothes meant nothing. His suit might have become disheveled during a tussle with the actual owner of it. She shook her head at the thought. "You do own the place, don't you?"

At his lack of a response, she scanned the area for something to toss at him if she needed to dash for the door. The closest object was a large, brass lamp. If he made any fast moves ...

All coherent thought fled when he smiled down at her while lightly running his hands up both of her arms. "Yes, I'm the owner."

Her heart really shouldn't be pounding in her chest just because the man was preparing to restrain her if she attacked him with deadly, brass force. It wasn't like she'd never been near a man before, but even her prior intimate relationships had been cautious endeavors. No man had ever brought to mind the words *carnal abandon* like this one did. When he looked at her, no one and nothing else existed.

"Before you clock me, would you like to see my license?" he asked while his thumb traced the edge of her collarbone rhythmically. Hypnotically. "Would you?" he prompted in response to her silence.

"Yes," she said breathlessly, unable to concentrate on anything beyond the way her body was responding to his touch. Her skin burned beneath his light caress. Her stomach quivered with an anticipation she had previously only read about. *Yes, to whatever you're asking.*

Her state of arousal was not lost on the man towering above her and the answering pleasure in his eyes shook her out of her daze. She stepped back, away from his touch and gave herself

a mental shake. This kind of passion had no place in the life she'd built for herself. "I mean no. No, I believe you. You were right. I should go. I can finish everything tomorrow."

His lids lowered slightly, making his expression unreadable.

"Do you know what I'm thinking?" he asked.

Unless he was also imagining the two of them naked, rolling around on the thick area rug in the living room, she was pretty much stumped. "No," she croaked.

"I'm starving and I hate to eat alone. I'd be grateful if you joined me for a meal."

That wouldn't be wise. There were at least a hundred, maybe a thousand, reasons why she should leave now before she made a fool of herself. Yet, she was tempted.

It was more than the athletic span of his shoulders, more than the strong line of his jaw. She couldn't even blame the sadness in his eyes, because the exhausted man of earlier had been replaced by a virile male who knew exactly how to get what he wanted—and right now he wanted her.

Every sensible cell in her body urged her to turn tail and run, but wasn't that what she always did when life offered her something she considered too good to be true? She chose safety and certainty over less reliable dreams and desires.

Just this once she wanted to sample what she'd been missing. Just this once she wouldn't run.

Well, not immediately, anyway.

She'd share a meal with the near god before her, enjoy the way he made her skin tingle with just a look, and leave before anything happened. He wouldn't have to eat alone and she could have an hour or so of pretending any of this was real.

"Any problems with Chinese?" she asked as she mentally reviewed the local places she knew would deliver.

The question seemed to jolt him. "Chinese what?"

"Food?" she added helpfully.

“Oh,” he visibly relaxed. “Takeout.”

“Yes, there is a good place right around the corner that I know delivers—unless you’d like me to try to find something else.”

“No.” He shook his head at some private joke. “Sorry, for a minute there I forgot.” Hands in his pockets, he rocked back on his heels, still looking highly amused by his thoughts.

“Forgot what?” she couldn’t help but ask.

With unexpected tenderness, he slid one of her wayward curls behind her ear. “That you’re exactly what I need.” Before she could catch her breath, he stepped back and handed her far too much money, no matter what she ordered. “Order some food while I take a shower.” His knock-’em-dead sex appeal returned as he chuckled and sauntered away, tossing over his shoulder, “I’ve heard I need one.”

Abby fanned her red face with the bills as she watched him climb the stairs two at a time. Not quite shaking herself free of the mental image of Mr. Armani naked beneath the steamy spray of the shower, Abby went in search of her purse and cell phone.

A man that sexy is just trouble.

Luckily it was unlikely that she would ever see him again after today. They would share one quick meal and then she’d head back to Lil and reality.

Back to the quiet, predictable life she’d built for herself.

That thought held less appeal than usual.

*End of Excerpt from Maid for the Billionaire, Book 1 of the
Legacy Collection*

(Get the full book by clicking [HERE](#))

*Read on for an Excerpt from Always Mine, Book 1 of the
Barrington Billionaires*

Excerpt from Always Mine

Book 1 of the Barrington Billionaires

When it comes to getting what he wants, Asher Barrington is a hammer who is known for crushing his opponents. From the moment Emily walks into his office and challenges him, winning takes on a whole new meaning.

The only thing standing between Emily Harris and her goal to open a museum for the blind is an arrogant, sexy as hell billionaire, who thinks sleeping with her will not complicate the situation.

He won't change. She won't back down.

But together they sizzle.

****This is book one of a spin off series from The Legacy Collection and The Andrades. You fell in love with Dominic Corisi and Gio Andrade—come meet the rest of the family. All new couples with cameos from many of your favorite characters.**

Love reading books set in the same world? Watch for Jeannette Winter's release, *One White Lie*. Her series will mirror my time line. It won't be necessary to read hers to enjoy mine, but it sure will enhance the fun.

Chapter One

Asher Barrington pushed a small package off to one side of his Boston office desk and stood. Distant relatives had recently become persistently, tediously interested in opening a dialogue. The package was their latest attempt and would hit the trash unopened. Asher had little time and even less patience for “family” who had done nothing when his parents had needed their support.

His mother’s side, the Stanfields, and the Andrade family his Aunt Patrice had married into, were both extremely wealthy. Either of them could have come to the aid of his father and stopped him from losing his career, but they hadn’t. Why? Because no one respects a weak man.

Asher had been old enough to be shamed by his father’s scandal. When his classmates had heartlessly taunted him, Asher had discovered how very different he was from his father. He hadn’t retreated from confrontation. He’d gone after those who’d found enjoyment in his pain and had taken them down with whatever means was at his disposal. He’d been smart enough to keep the evidence of his retaliation off the radar of the school and his parents. Except for the time he’d taken on a bully. He’d made sure that fight was both public and final. No one had laughed at him after that day, and that win helped shape the man he’d become.

He’d taken his trust fund from his grandfather and built a financial empire with it. Regardless of how successful he became, he had yet to hear his father say he was proud of him. When they did speak of his business his father would only caution him to soften his approach, tread more carefully, risk less. That wasn’t how Asher operated nor was it how he wanted to. He had goals for himself and his company, and if that meant crushing his opposition, it was nothing more than the way of the world. Eat or be eaten. Expand or perish. Asher’s father had been a great man, but he should have

fought harder for what he had. Asher was determined to not make the same mistake.

Nothing and no one stood between him and a goal. When Asher had first started his biochemical company and then expanded it by undercutting the prices of the competition, his father had said, “Be careful. When you’re a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”

Asher had given up trying to explain how the world worked to his father. His parents were perfectly happy in their middle-class home, driving their ten-year-old cars. They certainly weren’t poor, but they considered themselves better off for not having fought his mother’s family for anything other than their children’s trust funds. How a man who had once been one of the most influential US senators and a woman who’d been born into the top of the privileged one percent could be satisfied with obscurity was a constant mystery Asher had given up trying to solve. One of Asher’s brothers, Lance, believed their mother had been afraid of her father as well as her sister. Both were dead now so that was another topic that held little interest for Asher. Had his mother ever appealed to him for help, Asher would have dealt with both of them for her. He feared no one.

There was a light knock on the door and Ryan Corson, Asher’s personal assistant, entered. He was a reliable, unflappable, problem solver and that had made him an indispensable member of Asher’s team. He was paid well above his job description because he had proven himself in a variety of ethically complex situations. Asher didn’t need a conscience; he needed a team that would follow his orders without hesitation, so those were the people he’d surrounded himself with.

“Mr. Corisi is quickly becoming impatient,” Ryan said. “Shall I send him in?”

Asher sat on the edge of his desk and checked his watch. “Tell him I’m on a conference call for five more minutes.”

Ryan grimaced. “He may not wait.”

“He will. He’s curious.”

“I’ll tell him, but I’m guessing not too many people make Mr. Corisi wait for anything.”

“Exactly,” Asher said with a flash of teeth. Dominic was known for losing his temper easily. “Always play to your opponent’s weaknesses.”

Ryan gave Asher a curious look. “Is he our competition? He’s in an entirely different industry.”

Asher pushed off the desk. “Every person who is not on my team is against it. Remember that. Dominic is getting impatient. Good. Keep your opponent off balance and it’s easier to get information from them.”

Ryan neither agreed nor disagreed. He retreated to his office and to the likely unpleasant task of informing one of the most powerful people in the country that he needed to cool his heels for a few more minutes.

Asher slowly checked the messages on his phone, straightened the already straight papers on his desk, and finally opened the door of his office. “Dominic, thank you for coming.”

Dominic turned and gave him a dark look Asher pretended not to see. Dominic growled, “When you said it was a matter that couldn’t be spoken about on the phone, you piqued my interest.” Although Dominic didn’t mention it, his irritation at being kept waiting was obvious. “This had better be important.”

Asher smiled smoothly, deliberately ignoring that as well. “Come in. Ryan, hold my calls.” He waited until he knew Dominic was paying attention and added, “Unless it’s Freethy. Then put him through.” He heard Dominic’s impatient huff and hid his satisfaction at how easy it was to use a man’s pride against him. After closing his office door, he said, “Have a seat, Dominic.”

Dominic folded his arms across his chest and kept standing. “I don’t have time for whatever game you’re playing, Asher. What do you want to discuss?”

Asher rocked back on his heels and pocketed his hands in his trousers. “I need the name of your contact in Trundaie.”

Dominic studied him for a long moment, then said, “I don’t deal with unstable governments anymore.”

Asher smiled knowingly. “I understand. You have a family to think about now.”

“I do.”

“How is your wife? And your daughter—Judy, isn’t it?”

Dominic relaxed his stance. “Both are well. Judy just started kindergarten.”

“Wow, that happened fast.”

“It did. It feels like only yesterday I was learning to change a diaper. In a blink of an eye, she’s reading to me at bedtime instead of the other way around.”

Asher leaned back against his desk. “Tell me, how long do I have to pretend to give a shit about your family before you cough up your old contact in Trundaie?”

Dominic’s eyes narrowed, then he barked out a laugh. “You remind me of myself, Asher, and that’s not a compliment.”

Asher picked up a folder, took out a photo of an outbuilding that had been destroyed, and threw it on the table near Dominic. “I’m having issues with the rebels in Trundaie. We both know they don’t care why I’m there. This is extortion, plain and simple. I know they went against you when you were there, and you paid someone in the military to get them to back off. All I need is a name, and I’ll handle the rest.”

Dominic shook his head. “I told you, I’ve distanced myself from those contacts. Trundaie’s instability has increased since I was last there. I understand the temptation of fast money that can be made in places no one else will go, but don’t underestimate the price you pay for making those kinds of enemies.”

With a sarcastic chuckle, Asher straightened. “How does it feel to be a lion on a leash? We’ve worked the same

international circuit for too long for me to believe you don't still have your hand in it. The contract we have with Trundaie will open up the whole Asia continent to using our product. They pride themselves on their low prices, and using our synthetic material instead of oil will cut their production prices in half. We don't have to stay in Trundaie. The government will purchase our facility once we've proven to them that it can be lucrative. Once we have them, the Western markets will cave because they'll have no other choice. They'll need either a facility or product from us. Maybe you can't play in the big sandbox anymore, Dominic, but don't begrudge me the pleasure. All I need is a name."

Dominic shook his head, but said, "I'll make a call."

Asher crossed the room and held out his hand. "I'll send you a postcard from Trundaie."

Dominic shook his hand. He didn't look the least bit bothered by Asher's baiting. "You're wrong about one thing, Asher. I don't miss my old life. It was exciting, but it was empty. Life is about more than that."

Asher walked him to the door. "I'll take your word for that. Thanks for coming by."

Dominic nodded and added, "Coming by was never in question. Some of your family has become like my own."

"If you mean the Andrades, you can have them," Asher said.

Dominic gave him an odd look but didn't say more before leaving.

After he was gone, Asher called his business partner, Brice Henderson. He didn't waste time with pleasantries. "I need you to move the deadline up."

"The compound needs an additional round of testing."

Brice was a genius, but he didn't understand the complexities of the volatile international market. "The sooner we have the facility up and running, the sooner we can hand it off to the government and get the hell out of there. Get me the product ahead of schedule."

“Nothing will happen if I can’t get this compound right.”

“‘Nothing’ is not an option. We’re delivering something to them. We have too much riding on this not to. Do whatever it takes.”

“Asher, unlike your Neanderthal negotiations, science cannot be rushed.”

“Things are heating up in Trundaie. We need the standing government to back us, but they won’t do that until we show them how profitable it will be for them. We need to get our facility up and running ... now.”

“It’ll be ready by the date we agreed to.”

Asher hung up the phone and returned to his seat behind his desk. Arguing with Brice would be a waste of time. He rubbed a hand roughly over his face and typed in the password on his computer. His cell phone beeped, announcing a text. It was an encrypted message from Dominic. A name. Perfect.

The phone on his desk buzzed. “Mr. Barrington, there is a Ms. Emily Harris here to see you. She said she has an appointment, but it’s not on my calendar.”

“I don’t know the name. Tell her I’m in a meeting, and she’ll have to come back, but don’t schedule her.”

Ryan lowered his voice. “I tried that, Mr. Barrington, but she said your mother made the appointment.”

“Shit.” He vaguely remembered agreeing to speak to someone. It was probably one of his mother’s friends, older than sin, possibly senile, and most likely there to ask for a donation to some charity his mother thought he should care about. The quicker he met with her, the sooner she’d be out of his hair. “Send her in.”

* * *

Emily Harris crossed and uncrossed her legs nervously, then tucked a defiant curl back behind her ear. She looked down at her French manicure and took a deep, calming breath. The life expectancy of acrylic nails on her was less than a day. She’d purchased a beige dress suit for the trip, but it was her only

business attire, so she hoped Mr. Barrington could be persuaded to change his mind in one meeting.

Emily wasn't normally a confrontational person. She was a self-professed people pleaser. To her, there was nothing wrong with wanting those around her to be happy. Both her grandfather and her mother had done everything they could to give her a good life. She was grateful, and that gratitude was the fuel that fed her determination to take her fight directly to the CEO of B&H Advanced Engineering. If anyone had told her six months ago she'd be in Boston taking on one of the nation's richest men, she wouldn't have believed herself capable.

But here I am. It's amazing how motivating a dose of desperation can be.

When B&H first began their attempts to purchase properties in her town, she hadn't worried. Her land was nearly dead center on the proposed plans for demolition and development, but she'd been confident her neighbors would never sell. One by one, though, they'd accepted offers and moved away.

At first, Emily had tried to reason with the company representatives who relentlessly offered to buy her land. When that didn't work, she stopped answering their phone calls. Their unopened letters were piled on her kitchen table. She hoped if she blocked all communication with them they would see how serious she was.

Their response had been a summons to court. It wasn't until she'd taken the letter to a lawyer and been advised to sell that she understood how dire her situation was.

"I won't sell," she'd told the lawyer.

"You won't have a choice," he'd answered sadly, removing his glasses and placing them on his desk. "I could cite countless similar cases where the plaintiff lost or took a payout in arbitration. Why put yourself through that? Make them an offer you can live with and move. You don't have the resources to win against a company like B&H."

“I won’t sell,” she growled before she gathered her papers and left the office of the only lawyer within fifty miles of her home.

I won’t.

It didn’t help her confidence when she heard Mr. Barrington’s secretary admit he’d tried to get rid of her and failed.

After weeks of trying to contact Mr. Barrington and being given the run around, Emily wasn’t going anywhere until she was given a chance to speak to him in person. *I don’t care how long I have to sit here. I didn’t come this far to give up now.*

An office door opened. Emily stood quickly, dropping her small purse on the floor in front of her. Because the universe had a mischievous sense of humor, most of the contents spilled out onto the rug at her feet. She scrambled to pick everything up and groaned when she saw her wallet had bounced beneath the chair she’d been sitting on. She bent but couldn’t reach it, so she went down onto her knees and grabbed it, stuffing it back into her bag before standing.

As she straightened she noted the polished pair of shoes standing less than a foot away. Her eyes scanned their way up a pair of charcoal trousers, a stark white shirt, and an expensive looking tie before landing on the face of the man the suit had obviously been tailored to fit. Her artistic eye missed nothing. Not the breadth of his chest, the strong lines of his jaw, nor the boldness of his hazel eyes. Mr. Barrington was not the soft suit she’d expected to meet after speaking to his mother. As much as the artist in her appreciated his symmetry, the woman in her was rocked back by the power emanating from him. Although they had yet to exchange a single word, Emily knew she was in the presence of a man who demanded instead of asked. She didn’t want to be, but for just a second or two she basked in the desire that kind of masculinity sent tingling through her. She knew she should say something, but the exact reason for her meeting with him temporarily eluded her. One of her curls sprang free and fell across her face. She swayed and continued to take in the perfection of the man before her.

His smile was cold and that helped remind Emily why she was there. He held out a hand toward her as he gave her another head-to-toe evaluation. “Emily Harris. It’s always a pleasure to meet one of my mother’s friends.”

Emily hesitated before placing her hand in his. Lying didn’t come easily to her. “I’m not actually—” Emily started to admit then stopped herself. She could only imagine what he’d say if she said the truth. *I needed to talk to you, and you wouldn’t see me, so I asked my hair stylist if she could help. She knew someone who knew the nanny of a woman who plays bridge with your mother. A few phone calls. More than a little begging and explaining why I had to speak with you, and here I am. Right here. Holding on to your hand and wondering what the hell I can say to make you care about my plight.* Emily pulled her hand free, squared her shoulders, and said, “Thank you for seeing me.”

Emily spent a good deal of time studying the faces of strangers and honing her skill when it came to capturing their essence in the clay sculptures she created for a living. Although she was far from famous, her work brought her a steady income, and that was more than many artists could say. She searched the expression on the man before her. His face was carefully devoid of emotion. He was a man in control, even of himself.

He glanced at the wall behind Emily, then down at her again. “You have ten minutes of my time. Follow me.” He walked back into his office without waiting to see if she would.

She met the eyes of the male assistant briefly. If she was hoping for some encouragement, there was none there. He looked away and started typing. Emily raised her chin and hoped she looked confident as she walked into what represented her first foray into the world of big business.

Mr. Barrington was sitting on the corner of his desk with his arms folded intimidatingly across his chest. “If you’re coming in, close the door behind you.”

“Sorry, of course,” Emily said more apologetically than she meant to. *Damn it, I’m not sorry. I’m angry, and I have every right to be.* She walked over to the chairs just in front of his desk.

He looked at her for a long moment. “Have a seat.”

Be strong. She swallowed hard and met his eyes again. “I’d rather stand.”

A spark of something lit his eyes briefly before his expression became guarded again. “What are you doing here, Ms. Harris?”

Emily clasped her hands in front of her and said firmly, “I came to give you a warning.”

His eyebrows rose ever so slightly in surprise, and a faint smile pulled at his lips. He lowered his hands to the desk on either side of him and leaned forward. “Really?” He glanced down at his watch. “This should be interesting.”

What a self-centered bastard. Emily’s back straightened with pride. *Laugh now, but you won’t be amused when you realize how serious I am.* “You may think you won in Welchton, but you haven’t. You don’t have my land yet, and you won’t get it. If you take me to court, I will win, no matter what your army of lawyers tell you.”

Asher leaned back and pressed a button on the phone on his desk. “Ryan, are we buying property in Welchton?”

The assistant’s voice came across on speakerphone. “Yes, sir. You wanted a northern New England research facility. We chose New Hampshire. You signed the paperwork to move forward with it.”

“I did. How far along is the project?”

“We have all the permits. We’re waiting to resolve one minor issue.”

“Is that issue a reluctant seller?” Asher’s eyes held Emily’s as he spoke.

“Yes, but we don’t foresee it being a problem for long.”

“Nor do I,” Asher said firmly. “Ryan, interesting fact about Ms. Harris. She’s from Welchton.” He hit the button on the phone again, ending the call. He rubbed his chin and studied Emily. “Let me guess: You feel your property is worth more than we offered.”

There it was, the opening for her to explain the reason she refused to sell. She had to believe he was a reasonable man. Once he heard the history of the property and her plans for it, he’d surely change his mind about buying it. “There is no amount that would convince me to sell. My family—”

He straightened to his full height and looked her over again. “No amount? How about double what they offered you?”

Emily clenched her hands at her sides. It wasn’t what he said, but how he said it, that was insulting. “Do you know what their proposal was?”

“No.”

Anger burned and grew within Emily. She took a deep breath, though, and told herself to remain calm. There was a chance he didn’t know what he was about to destroy. “If you’d give me a minute to explain, I think you’d feel—”

Asher stepped closer to her, watching her expression closely. “How I feel is irrelevant when it comes to business.” He stopped less than a foot in front of her, forcing Emily to crane her neck to look up at him. “Why don’t we end this little game now? Tell me what you’re holding out for, and I’ll tell you if you have a chance in hell of getting it.”

“This isn’t a game. The Harris Tactile Museum is six months from completion. Maybe if you came up to see it, you’d understand how important it is.”

He didn’t look the least bit interested. “I’m sure our offer took your relocation cost into account. If not, counter with an amount that would, and my people will crunch the numbers.”

“I’m not selling, Mr. Barrington. Period. I won’t let you steal my land, and that’s what you’d be doing, even if you did

it in a court of law. Having enough money to buy the outcome you want doesn't make it right."

His smile was indulgent and Emily, who considered herself a non-violent woman, was tempted to smack it off his face. "I like your spirit, Ms. Harris, but that doesn't change that you're standing between me and something I want. If I were you, I'd put together a counterproposal you can live with. I'll give you my email. You can send it to me personally, and I'll make sure it's at least considered."

She leaned toward him and threatened, "I may not have money, but I care about this museum, and other people will, too. I won't be sending you a counteroffer, because I'm not selling."

A corner of his mouth curled in a way that sent waves of heat through Emily. "I always get what I want, Ms. Harris."

Emily stepped back. "Not this time." She walked out and closed the door firmly behind her, taking a brief moment to lean against it for support before pushing off. She defiantly moved her wayward curl off her face and held her head high as she walked past the desk of Asher Barrington's snooty assistant.

Chapter Two

I can't believe I thought he'd care. What a pompous jackass. "I always get what I want." Well, not this time, buddy. My mother didn't let anything stop her from following her dreams, and I won't let someone like you stop me from building a tribute to her. As she drove out of Boston and into one of the surrounding suburbs, she rehashed her heated meeting with Mr. I'll make sure it's at least considered Barrington again and again. Jerk.

I should have kept my cool. I should have spoken more about my mother and the reason the museum needs to be where I'm building it.

Not that he probably would have cared. Bastard.

I was hoping to do this the easy way, but it looks like I have to go with plan B.

Obstacles are opportunities if you're brave enough to take them on. That was what her mother had always said. Emily refused to give up. Determination was in her genes just as surely as art was.

Her mother, Wendy Harris, had lived a life that had inspired everyone who knew her. Born blind, she hadn't let that stop her from becoming an artist, a painter at that. Her works were uniquely tactile. She'd pushed the limits of what was considered a painting and had developed a technique that brought a three-dimensional element to her artwork.

Emily's own appreciation for art had been acquired at her mother's knee. They'd spent countless afternoons in museums. Her mother would ask Emily to describe a painting, first with what she saw, but then with greater detail about how the painting made her feel. Eventually Emily began to use clay to make the paintings her mother loved even more accessible to her.

Her mother had dreamed of creating a museum where people could run their hands over every piece of artwork

displayed. A place where those who could not see were not banned from experiencing masterpieces. Nothing would stop Emily from making that museum a reality.

Determination made it possible for Emily to consider the unthinkable. Plan B was bold and more than a little underhanded. To some degree she felt like a snitch, but she steeled herself against her doubts. She was desperate.

She hit redial on her phone. A woman answered. “Mrs. Barrington?”

“Emily? Do call me Sophie. Mrs. Barrington sounds like I’m one hundred years old.” Sophie’s next comment was directed to her husband, Dale. “It’s the woman from New Hampshire who is building a museum.” She paused as if listening to a response from her husband before saying, “Did you make it to Boston?”

“I did. I’m actually driving back to my hotel in Newton.”

“That’s only a town over from us.”

I know. “What a coincidence,” Emily said instead.

“My husband and I are just about to have lunch. If you have time, we’d love to meet you in person. You could tell us all about your meeting with our son.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Emily said with just the right amount of pleased surprise.

Emily pulled into a highway rest area and typed the address into her GPS. She told Sophie she’d be there in less than an hour. After hanging up, she stayed in her car, taking deep breaths and telling herself she was doing the right thing.

When her nerves had settled somewhat, she called her best friend for support. It rang through to voice mail the first time, but Emily called back. *Come on, Celeste. Pick up.*

When Celeste finally answered, she said, “I’m in a meeting with a client. Can we talk later?”

“This is an emergency.”

“I need to take this call. Tim, could you take over for a minute? I’ll be right back,” Celeste said. A moment later, she asked, “Did you break down on the side of the road? Are you hurt?”

“My car is fine. I’m fine.”

“Then what’s the emergency? I’m meeting with a new client right now who has flown in from New York. This could be big, Em.”

Emily instantly felt badly about interrupting her, but they’d been best friends since kindergarten and, although Celeste had moved to Boston after college, they’d kept that friendship close by staying involved in each other’s lives. “Remember how I told you I was going to go see Asher Barrington? I just left that meeting. It didn’t go well. So, I’m moving onto Plan B.”

“Wait, is that the crazy idea you had about befriending his parents and guilting him into moving his facility?”

“It’s not crazy. Some people listen to their parents. It’s worth a shot, anyway.”

“Don’t do this. I know a few lawyers. I’ll call one tomorrow.”

“I don’t have money for a big-city lawyer. All my money is tied up in the museum. You know that.”

Celeste sighed. “I could try to talk one of them into doing it pro bono.”

Emily gripped the steering wheel tightly. “You think they’d take on B&H for free?”

Celeste made a frustrated sound. “No, probably not. You really went to see Asher Barrington?”

“Yes, and you would have been proud of me. I didn’t let him intimidate me. I made it clear I wouldn’t sell my land at any price.”

“That must not have gone over well. What did he say?”

“He said he always gets what he wants.”

“Oh, boy. And then?”

“I told him he wouldn’t this time. And I walked out.”

“And now you’re off to meet his parents?”

Emily looked around at the parking lot she hadn’t yet built up the nerve to leave. “It’s the only way, Celeste. He doesn’t care who he hurts or even about the facility he’s building up there. He didn’t even know how far along the project was. Maybe he won’t care what his parents think either, but what other choice do I have? The museum is so close to being ready to open its doors. I can’t let him take that from me, from everyone who would enjoy it.”

“Em, this has trouble written all over it. I don’t like it.”

“That’s not good. I was hoping you could give me one of your pep talks. I’m more nervous than I thought I’d be.”

“That’s because you know this is wrong. Emily, you don’t have a manipulative bone in your body. You’ve never been a good liar. Oh my God, remember that time you accidentally walked out of a store with an extra item in your cart and almost got arrested because you had to return it and confess? Anyone else would have left it there or taken it with them and not thought twice about it, but you couldn’t. It’s part of what I love about you, but it’s also why this will never work.”

Emily put her car in drive and pulled back out onto the highway. “I can’t be that person right now, Celeste. I have to be stronger than that. Tell me this can work. Even if you don’t believe it. Just say it. I need to hear it.”

After a long quiet moment, Celeste said, “If anyone can get someone’s parents to love them, it’s you, Emily. Just be careful. Yes, your mother wanted you to finish her dream, but your safety would have mattered to her more than any building ever could.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“You’re way out of your league, Em, and I’m saying this as a friend who loves you like a sister. You’re not a fighter; you never have been. Do you remember when Donnie Allan tried to rough you up for your lunch money? I told you to punch

him in the face. You sold brownies from the end of your driveway for a week to raise enough money so you could both have lunch.”

“Yes, and it worked. I gave him the money, but I was firm that it was a one-time deal. He never bothered me again after that.”

“That’s because I threatened to tell everyone he wore his sister’s underpants if he didn’t leave you alone.”

“Oh my God, you never said a word.”

Celeste made a strangled sound. “You’re a nice person, Em. There’s nothing wrong with that. You like to believe there is good in everyone, but sometimes there isn’t. Donnie was a bully. Your way doesn’t win against that. I’m afraid nice won’t win with B&H either. I wish I had the connections to help you with this, but I don’t.”

A lump of emotion clogged Emily’s throat and made it difficult to get the next words out. “I don’t have a Plan C. This is it. If I go home now, it’s over. I’m doing this, Celeste. Even if it’s the craziest idea you’ve ever heard, tell me it’ll work. I need my best friend to believe in me right now.”

In a tone that revealed how much Emily’s plea had moved Celeste, she said, “You’ve got this, Emily. Call me after you win his family over.”

* * *

After a long jog along the Charles River, Asher took the elevator up to his penthouse apartment in Beacon Hill. He downed a glass of water and checked the messages on his phone while heading toward his bedroom. His mother had called but hadn’t left a voice message.

He threw his phone on his bed and stripped. He’d shower, have something quick to eat, then deal with whatever manner of family crisis she wanted his help with this time. As the oldest of six children, there was always something.

He turned on the shower and stepped beneath the hot spray. Six children. If he’d ever doubted his parents’ sanity, the number of children they’d decided to have was evidence

enough they were both crazy. Five boys and one girl. He wasn't sure if his parents had stopped having children because they finally had a little girl, or if more hadn't been possible, but either way they had done more than their fair share in populating the planet.

Asher turned his back so the water massaged his shoulders. It had been a very long day, but he'd done what he'd set out to do. He'd made contact with the man Dominic had directed him to, and if all went as planned the rebels would have a nasty fight on their hands very soon. It was an expensive and dangerous course to take, but he'd been down that road in other countries and won. Being a hammer had its advantages. He won again and again because he'd built a reputation for smashing through whatever was in his way. In business, few people had the nerve to stand up to him and those who did were quickly, decisively, shown why they shouldn't attempt it again.

Everything would be a hell of a lot easier if he could apply the rules of business to his private life. Both his parents and siblings were as frustrating as trying to walk across a floor covered with marbles. He'd fought for a life where things made sense and he was in control, but he had no control over his family.

He lathered his hair and thought of something more pleasant than his impending conversation with his parents. A vivid image of the woman who had come to his office earlier that day filled his thoughts.

His first view had been her cute little ass waving in the air as she'd been on her knees digging for something beneath a chair. Her skirt had ridden up, revealing tight thighs he'd wanted to run a hand between. He closed his eyes and images of her brought a lusty smile to his face.

He had a healthy sexual appetite, and he'd found Emily Harris very attractive. She was a small thing, shorter than his usual taste. He pictured how easily it would be to lift her so she could wrap her legs around him as he thrust up into her.

There had been nothing suggestive about their meeting, but his cock hardened with anticipation as he replayed their exchange in his mind. Women didn't normally stand up to him, and she had done so fearlessly.

When she'd stood there, her eyes flashing and chest heaving, he'd found himself in the unique situation of wanting a woman who appeared to have no interest in him personally. He stepped out of the shower, dried off, and called a member of his team who handled security checks. It wasn't unusual for him to obtain background checks on people he dealt with.

"How deep do you want us to dig?" his man asked him.

"I want everything," Asher answered abruptly and hung up. Knowledge was power, and he didn't have any problem using it to his advantage. He did hope, however, she didn't give in to him too easily. He met his eyes in the mirror above the bathroom sink. It had been too long since he'd felt this type of anticipation about anything. He saw the light of excitement in his expression and shook his head in amusement.

Emily held the promise of being a tantalizing distraction. He liked that she was passionate about the little museum project she mentioned. If being with her was as good as his cock believed, he'd gift her a piece of property elsewhere, possibly even help her fund her museum. He'd always been a generous lover.

Women didn't turn him down, and Emily would be no different. She was feisty and self-assured; he couldn't wait to see how that translated in the bedroom. His bed to be specific.

Asher dressed in boxer briefs and lounge pants and heated the meal left for him by his housekeeper. He answered emails and read over a few documents in preparation for the next day. When he had no other excuse for delaying any longer, he called his mother. It was only after he'd dialed the number that he checked the time. Shit. It was nearly ten. His mother was probably already asleep, but she'd worry if she saw he'd called, so he stayed on the line.

"It's late, Asher, but it's good to hear your voice. You've been so busy lately. I miss you," she said warmly.

Another mother might have said those same words with the intention of making her child feel guilty. Sophie Barrington never had an ulterior motive. She said it simply because she meant it. His mother was the most loving person he'd ever met. She put the happiness of others above her own. He'd like to admire that trait, but it had prevented her from being able to stop his father's career from imploding. She'd given up, and he would never understand that decision. Still, that didn't stop him from loving her. "Time got away from me, but I didn't want to not call in case it was something important."

"It could have waited, but I did want to speak with you. What did you think of Emily Harris?"

Nothing I could say to my mother, Asher thought. He pushed away the image of her perfectly rounded ass as she'd bent to retrieve something from beneath a chair in Ryan's office. "Why do you ask?"

"Thank you for seeing her today. From the first time I heard it, her story moved me. Your father felt the same way."

"How well do you know her, Mom?"

"Not very, but she spent this afternoon with us, and she is just as sweet and earnest in person as she sounded on the phone. I hated to see her leave. She gave us a painting her mother had made. It's the most incredible thing. When you look at it, you miss the beauty of it. It's all one color. But if you close your eyes and run your hands over it, it's a masterpiece. I cried. Her mother was blind; did she tell you? Remarkable."

Asher's hand tightened on the phone. Although part of him was interested in what his mother knew about Emily, the protective son in him was instantly on high alert. "Mom, don't see that woman again. She is trying to use you to get me to change my mind about buying her property in New Hampshire."

His mother laughed. "I know. She told us. She's not a hard nut to crack. We were her Plan B. How adorable is that? She told us all about how she went to your office and warned you that you couldn't have her land. She also told us what you

said. Asher, I raised you better than that. You could have at least promised to look into alternative sites.”

Asher paced the length of his living room and growled his displeasure. “This is business, Mom.”

“I know, and normally I wouldn’t get involved, but blocking a museum for the blind from opening? Really? Asher, I can’t stand back and condone that.”

“Her museum will open, but not at its present location.”

With a pained sigh, Sophie said, “Did you know that her mother gave her that property? It was passed down from her grandfather. When she told me about how she and her mother had created the core artwork for the museum together and what it meant to her, I knew I had to call you. You can’t buy her land, Asher. Find another site for your ... whatever.”

“Not possible. My company has invested time and money into that location.”

“Asher Dale Barrington, how often do I ask you for anything?”

Fuck. Using his middle name meant his mother was serious. “All I can promise is that I’ll contact Ms. Harris and discuss the matter with her again.”

“Thank you, Asher. I’m confident that when you hear more about her project you’ll see why you’ll have to change your plans this time.”

“Consider this handled, Mom. There is no need for you to speak with Ms. Harris again.”

“I won’t get involved in your business again, Asher, but we did enjoy Emily’s company so much we invited her to spend the weekend at our place in Nantucket. She’s never been, and there are several resident artists there who could be potential donors for her museum. I’d love to help her acquire some rare pieces. She was so grateful when I mentioned the idea to her. Even your father is excited, and it’s good for him to have something to think about besides his health.”

Oh, Emily, I underestimated you.

He smiled. He liked the challenge she presented. A rush of anticipation filled him as he considered his next move with her.

End of Excerpt from Always Mine, Book 1 of the Barrington Billionaires

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Prologue

Xander

Over a year earlier...

I had no idea what it felt like to be dead, but I was starting to wonder if I'd died and was paying for my life on Earth in the depths of Hell.

Every muscle in my body was twitching and burning with pain, and I couldn't control the thoughts—or maybe they were memories—bouncing around in my brain. I tried to open my eyes, but it was too damn painful, so I was stuck with the images I couldn't make go away.

I could remember how badly I'd needed my fix, and how I'd gone to some lowlife drug dealer to get the heroin. I'd gotten home and mixed up the injectable version of the drug, unwilling to settle for the effects of smoking or snorting it. I'd been so damn desperate that I had to have immediate relief.

I'd found the vein, and recalled the feeling of intense relief once the drug almost immediately hit my system.

After that, most of what happened was a blank until the damn paramedics had given me the mother of all shocks to my system...the opiate antidote.

Shit! I hated that medication. It had ended my oblivion, shocked my body back to being alert and hurting again.

How could those fuckers spoil my high?

“You almost died this time, Xander. What in the hell were you thinking?” a husky male voice muttered at my bedside.

I recognized the voice. It wasn't my brother, Micah, who was here with me this time. It was Julian. What in the hell was he doing here? My middle sibling should have been out on a movie shoot. He wasn't supposed to be back here in California.

I forgot all about what brother had come to be with me for this particular overdose. It didn't matter. There had been plenty of others before this one, and Micah almost always was the one who bailed me out of trouble.

Unfortunately, my brain wasn't all that functional, and all I could really think about was the intense pain of withdrawal.

Fuck! All I needed was to be high, and for everybody to leave me the hell alone. I wanted to forget my life and live in a world where all I needed to do was to get my next fix.

I was a junkie, and I was pretty sure I'd already hit rock bottom, but I'd never felt the collision because I'd been too stoned to give a damn.

My body started to shiver, and the pounding pain in my muscles traveled to my head. I hurt fucking everywhere, all because some asshole had decided to bring me back to reality.

Fuck reality! It was something I'd been trying to escape from for several years now.

"Xander! Can you hear me?" Julian asked in an urgent tone.

"Yeah. Now shut up," I insisted in a graveled voice, knowing from experience that talking was only going to make the pain worse.

"This is bullshit," Julian said angrily. "Why didn't I know that you were an addict?"

I opened my eyes painfully from the hospital bed and tried to focus on my brother. "Because Micah usually comes when something happens," I answered flatly, not caring who knew I needed drugs to survive.

I'd tried alcohol to dull the pain after my parents had been murdered and I'd pulled through my own injuries. But it wasn't working as well as it used to, and I preferred the total oblivion of drugs. I wasn't averse to drinking, but it took a whole pint these days to forget who I was and what had happened.

Honestly, I'd really rather have the prescription medications I'd taken for so long after my injuries three years ago, but the doctor finally decided I had to stop taking them, and refused any further prescriptions. Since then, I'd bought them on the street. When I got really desperate, I had to mix up heroin. Today had been one of those "desperate" days. Or had it been last night? Hell, I had no idea how much time had passed, but what did it matter?

"You have to stop this shit, Xander," Julian said fiercely. "Hell, you used to hate drugs. I remember you telling me how many of your rocker friends were using, and you used to think it was moronic. What happened to you?"

I looked at his anxious expression with a twinge of remorse. Yeah, I used to hate doping. "That was in another life," I answered.

"It's the *same* damn life. The only one you have," Julian said as he brought his fist down on the bedrail. "And it's still idiotic."

"Maybe I don't give a damn anymore. Just go. Get the fuck out of here. I never asked for anybody to come," I answered angrily.

"I'm not going anywhere until you're out of here," he said stubbornly. "Then, I'm taking you back east with me where you can get your shit together. They have a rehab—"

"I'm not doing rehab again," I growled at him, the pain of substance withdrawal clawing at every part of my body. "Why the hell can't you and Micah just leave me alone? Micah's involved with somebody, and you're both happy. Go back east and let me have my goddamn freedom."

Julian shot me a disappointed look that made me momentarily cringe as he answered, "I may not like you right now, but you're still my little brother. You're going with me."

"I'm not," I argued hoarsely.

"What's here in California for you? You have no family here, and probably very few friends. You aren't recording or performing again, so why do you need to stay here?"

So I can be stoned every day without anybody watching while I practically crawl to a place where I can get my next fix.

“Because I own a house here,” I argued. “It’s home.”

“Don’t give me that crap. The Sinclairs have property everywhere, and you have a home in Amesport, too. A house that Micah had built for you.”

“Told him not to bother,” I answered, not realizing that my eldest brother had followed through on his promise to bring all three of us together again by building us homes in some boring, small town on the eastern seaboard.

Julian was silent for a few moments before he took a deep breath and released it. “You’re an asshole. You know that, right?”

I shrugged. I didn’t much care what anybody thought about me anymore, not even my brothers.

He continued, “Micah is with somebody, and he’s fucking happy. For the first time in his life, I see him smile almost every damn day. He doesn’t deserve to have that joy smothered by your sorry ass. Clean your shit up, Xander. Whether you know it or not, this situation affects all of us.”

“It’s my life!”

“You’re our brother. You think Micah and I can actually be happy when we know you’re on the other side of the country trying to kill yourself? Do you know how hard it was for me and Micah when you were injured, sitting in the hospital night after night, not sure whether you were going to live or die?”

I heard Julian’s voice crack with anguish, and it was the most emotion I’d ever seen out of him in my entire life. “I’m a lost cause, Julian. Just live with it and move on.”

Honestly, I wished neither one of them would rush to California every time I did something stupid. It left me torn, and I’d hoped that Micah would finally just give up. He hadn’t. He’d just brought Julian in for backup.

“Not happening,” Julian answered stubbornly. “We aren’t giving up on you, Xander. *Not ever.* So live with *that*. We already lost Mom and Dad, and that’s as much as Micah and I can handle.”

The mention of my parents just made me want a fix, or a very large bottle of whiskey. But I had to admit that Julian’s guilt trip was getting to me. Hell, the last thing I wanted was to be responsible for making either of my brothers miserable. Did geography really matter? “Fine. I’ll go. But I’m not going to promise anything will change. I’ve been in rehab before. As you can see, I failed.”

“Do it because somewhere deep inside that selfish prick exterior, you still give a damn about me and Micah,” Julian suggested irritably.

Problem was, I actually *did* care about him and my elder brother. But all I wanted was for them to just go make themselves happy. I didn’t want any part of that. I was never going to change, and they’d eventually both have to accept it. “I’m doing what you want,” I told him, annoyed that he was still giving me an admonishing look. “Just go away and let me try to go back to sleep.”

“Oh, I’ll be back,” Julian warned. “I’ll be here every damn day until you’re discharged.”

“Great,” I said sarcastically.

“See ya tomorrow, little brother,” he said with a nod, then turned around and walked out the door of my hospital room.

Anger surged up inside me, and it nearly made me forget the agony that my body was going through. I sat up and noticed my hands were shaking, and my head started to pound harder from the sudden change in position.

“Fuck you,” I called out toward the door even though Julian was long gone.

I was pissed because he and Micah couldn’t just leave me alone.

In a moment of blind rage, I picked up the hospital meal that had obviously been left here while I was sleeping. With a

burst of anguished fury, I flung the entire tray against the wall, slightly appeased by the sound of breaking glass and the clanging of silverware hitting the floor.

Spent, I let myself fall back onto the pillow, knowing I was even more shattered than the plates and glasses that lay in pieces on the floor.

Julian and Micah would find out just how fucked up I was, and that nobody on this Earth was ever going to be able to put me back together again.

Chapter 1

Samantha

The present...

“I hope you’re ready for this.”

I nodded at Julian Sinclair as I watched him run a frustrated hand through his hair. “I can handle it, Mr. Sinclair.”

I took another sip of my iced coffee, glad that the brother of my next so-called boss suggested meeting at a coffee shop. Brew Magic had amazing coffee, and I’d needed a pick-me-up. Who knew that the small beach town in Amesport, Maine, was making some of the best coffee I’d ever had? My ass was dragging from getting up early in the morning to drive from New York City to Maine, so I was grateful for the caffeine fix I was eagerly sucking down like it was my savior.

“You haven’t met Xander yet,” he warned ominously. “I’ve seen your references, and believe me, we did an extensive background check. And please call me Julian. There are way too many ‘Mr. Sinclairs’ in this town.”

“You do understand that I’m just a housekeeper and a cook.” I’d reminded him of this fact several times, but I wanted to make sure that he wasn’t expecting miracles.

Oh, yeah. I knew Xander Sinclair was a big hot mess. I’d done my homework before I’d come here, and I’d spoken with Julian at length on the telephone many times. I could tell he was protective of his younger brother, and worried about his state of mind.

“I get it,” Julian answered with a nod. “What I *don’t* understand is why you wanted to come here to Amesport. When Micah and I started putting out private feelers for somebody to help and stay with Xander, the last thing we counted on was somebody with your qualifications,” Julian replied. “Xander knows you’re a housekeeper that’s going to be here on the island for as long as possible, which God knows

he really needs. But he isn't crazy about the idea of you being in his house, much less staying with him. I think he just wants to be alone."

The last thing Xander needed was to continue with his self-inflicted isolation. From what I'd gathered from Julian, his younger brother had been left alone long enough.

"My reasons for accepting the position are personal," I explained. "I wanted to get away from New York City for a while. I thought a nice beach town in the summer might be a great place to hang out."

"So you said. But you could have just gone on a vacation, right?"

I shook my head. "I like to work, and I wanted to check out things up north. I might eventually move to Maine. My grandparents had a summer cottage in this area when I was little, and I've always loved it."

The memories of having our family all together at Gran's beach house were some of the best recollections of my childhood. Unfortunately, she'd passed away when I was still in junior high school.

"It's a hell of a lot slower paced here, and a world away from New York City."

I shrugged. "Not everybody is cut out to live in the city."

Okay. That *was* a bit of a lie. I had actually liked my job in New York, and I'd miss my friends. But I wasn't lying when I told Julian I'd needed a break.

"Xander doesn't want you in his house. If he knew that I'm hoping you'll stay for longer than a few months, he'd refuse completely. Hell, I'm not even sure he'll let you in *now*."

I lifted my chin. "Tough. He'll have to get used to me being around." I was confident about my ability to talk my way into Xander's home. I'd dealt with a lot of badass men in New York that I was pretty certain were ornerier than Xander Sinclair.

“Don’t underestimate my little brother,” Julian warned as he took a gulp of his coffee. “He’s an asshole right now, and in worse shape than I’ve ever seen him. He’s clean, but I have a feeling he’s hanging on by a thread.”

“Can I be frank, Julian?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Xander has to *want* to stay clean. If he doesn’t, nothing and nobody is going to be able to keep him from going back to abusing drugs and alcohol. He’s isolated, and even though he’s close to his family physically now, he’s obviously not feeling like he’s part of the family again.”

I knew a thing or two about addicts. I’d dealt with one in my immediate family.

“He doesn’t seem to *want* to be part of the family again. We’ve tried,” Julian answered huskily. “I don’t know what the hell to do to make him want to stay free of drugs and alcohol. It’s like I lost my little brother, and I don’t know how to get him back.”

“I understand,” I murmured. “I’ll do what I can to help him.” At the very least, Julian’s brother would end up with a clean house. I was kind of anal about living organized and in a happy space—which for me meant a tidy living area.

“That’s all we ask,” Julian replied. “What are you going to do if he won’t let you in?”

“Convince him,” I replied. There was no way in hell I was going to let Xander turn me away. I hadn’t up and left my old job and drove for hours just to let him slam the door on me.

Julian grinned. “You know; you almost make me believe you can manage that.”

I smiled back at him. “Like I said, I’ll handle it.”

“His house really is a pig sty,” Julian grimaced and drained the last of his coffee.

“I don’t mind,” I replied. “Cleaning it up is part of my job.”

The two oldest Sinclair brothers were paying me to clean a house and cook meals, even if that home *was* currently a disaster.

He shook his head. “You haven’t seen it yet. It’s a beautiful home that Micah had built for him. It even has a recording studio, but that was wishful thinking on Micah’s part since Xander says he won’t ever perform again. The mansion is close to the shoreline, and the beach is pretty private. The place is almost brand new, but my little brother has already trashed it pretty badly.”

“Has he always been messy?”

“No. Well, no more than any other single guy who puts off cleaning up after himself. When we were kids, Xander was probably the tidiest of the three of us. He was also probably the one with the biggest heart. He’s changed.”

“He sounds angry and depressed. You said he still hasn’t hurt anyone.” I’d had other, lengthier conversations with both Micah and Julian on the phone to discern my new client’s current state of mind. I knew what I was getting myself into. But as long as my new boss had never injured anybody, I was good. I could handle an asshole as long as he didn’t have violent tendencies.

“He hasn’t. Not on purpose, anyway. He’s been startled by flashbacks a couple of times, but he wouldn’t intentionally hurt anyone. The only one he seems to want to destroy is himself.”

“He has multiple issues, Julian. I’m sure it will take time.”

Xander’s brothers hadn’t held back when they’d given me information on their little brother’s state of mind. They’d been honest, letting me know that he had problems, and exactly what they were.

“You think he just needs more time? Even though it’s been several years since my parents were killed and Xander was injured? He’s been through multiple rehabs with counseling.”

“Like I said on the phone, I think he needs purpose. He needs to want to recover completely.”

“Well, I hope you can help him find that purpose, because Micah and I have fucking failed miserably.”

“I’ll do my best.” It was all I could do.

“Fair enough,” he answered. “Would you like me to go with you to his house to introduce you?”

“Julian!” A loud female voice interrupted our conversation. “Hello, Julian.”

I watched as the handsome, blond Sinclair brother turned around. His back was facing the entrance, but I could see the elderly woman waving at him near the door. Brew Magic was packed, but she quickly made her way to our table with more spunk than I’d expect from a female who was probably in her eighties.

Julian shot her a charming smile as she stopped beside our table. “Beatrice. Nice to see you.”

I wanted to flinch from the intense, knowing stare the gray-haired woman gave me as she appeared to survey me carefully. I wasn’t sure why it bothered me. It wasn’t like I wasn’t used to being stared down, and her pink sneakers and purple jogging outfit weren’t exactly intimidating. But for some inexplicable reason, she made me uneasy.

“I’m so glad you finally got here, dear,” the woman exclaimed happily.

I looked at Julian in surprise. I thought he hadn’t shared my arrival here with anyone except Micah, their wives, and Xander.

He shook his head, indicating silently that the older woman didn’t know why I was here.

“I think you have me confused with someone else,” I told her politely, smiling back at her.

“Oh, there’s no mistake.”

Julian interrupted, “Samantha Riley, let me introduce you to Beatrice. She’s Amesport’s own official psychic and matchmaker.”

I picked up on the tone of his voice, and instantly knew he wanted me to humor this woman. Since she seemed harmless, I was okay with that. “How lovely,” I answered cordially. “You must have some remarkable talents.”

Beatrice waved her hand. “Oh, I wouldn’t go *that* far. Although Julian is very sweet to say so. I consider myself a seer, actually. And I don’t always recognize soulmates. But I seem to have a certain affinity with the Sinclairs. Predicted every one of their matches.”

I wasn’t quite sure what the truth actually was, but the elderly female seemed harmless enough, and her elevated spirit seemed almost contagious. “Is that right?”

“Oh, yes, dear. And I’ve been waiting a very long time for you to get here. Xander desperately needs you. This is for you.”

I held out my palm without thinking about it as she offered me a dark object. “What is this?” I questioned curiously.

“It’s your Apache tear,” she explained. “I don’t think you need it nearly as much as Xander, but it will help you along. You do have some of your defenses to break through.”

Okay. It was one of the most bizarre conversations I’d ever had, but as I closed my fist, I could swear the stone warmed in my hand. “It’s beautiful, but I can’t accept this. You don’t even know me.”

Beatrice was still staring, her intense gaze still uncomfortable. “I know your soul,” she professed.

“Are you saying that Samantha is Xander’s match, Beatrice?” Julian asked, sounding surprised.

I shifted my eyes to him, wondering if he really believed in the mystic. His question hadn’t quite sounded convinced. But he’d sounded hopeful, which scared the hell out of me.

The older woman nodded. “And we all know how much Xander needs her. I was afraid she’d be too late.”

Beatrice turned back toward the door, waving at another woman around her age. “Oh, there’s Elsie. We need to talk. It’s

been nice meeting you, dear. Welcome to Amesport.” She patted Julian on the shoulder. “I’m glad you’re happy now, Julian. Take care of your beautiful wife.”

“You know I will,” he answered.

I watched as the petite, elderly woman made her way back to the door and embraced her friend.

I clutched the stone tighter in my fist, trying to get rid of the weird feeling that it was meant to be mine. “Did that really just happen?”

Julian chuckled. “It did. I think you’ll find out that Amesport is a colorful town. But there’s nowhere I’d rather be.”

“Did she really predict your soulmates, or is she delusional?”

“Actually, she did. None of us know if it was coincidence or psychic magic, but we’re too happy to care.”

“Interesting,” I mumbled, knowing that Beatrice would be disappointed this time. I quickly dropped the stone into my handbag, which was hanging on the back of my chair.

“I think so,” Julian teased. “Honestly, I hope she’s right.”

I stood, sucked down the last of my coffee and grabbed my purse. “Why? The last thing your brother needs right now is a relationship. And I certainly don’t.”

Julian rose. “I don’t have a damn clue what my brother needs, Samantha. There’s not much we haven’t tried.”

“Please call me Sam.” I held out my hand.

Julian reached out and shook with a firm grasp. “Sam,” he corrected. “Honestly, I don’t care how you help Xander. I just want my little brother back.”

I nodded. “It could be a twisted road,” I warned. “And if he doesn’t want to talk to me, then I can’t be a companion to him. You’ll have to settle for his house being clean.”

“I’m willing to wait,” he answered hoarsely as he released my hand.

“I’ll be in touch.” I put the cross-body strap of my bag over my head.

“Do you want me to drive you?” he asked as he accompanied me from the building.

“No, thanks. I’ll find him.” I was better off approaching Xander alone. If he wasn’t thrilled about having company, I’d rather choose my own methods of persuasion.

I’ll figure it out when I meet Xander, but I am getting into that house.

“Take care,” Julian said as we parted ways outside. “If things get rough, call me.”

I nodded as I made my way to my compact car, hitting a button on the keychain to open the door as I absorbed the scent and warmth of a perfect summer day on the Atlantic coast.

The town was packed with tourists, most of them heading to the beach. I was momentarily diverted as I listened to the sound of the waves, and the smell of salt water lingering in the air.

I wanted to explore all of the little shops along Main Street, but a different, more intense mission was calling me, so the town and the beach would wait.

With one last deep breath of the outdoors, I situated myself in the driver’s seat and maneuvered my car out of town.

I was beyond ready to meet Xander Sinclair.

I just hoped he was ready for me.

Chapter 2

Xander

All I wanted was a goddamn drink! Why in the fuck was I still fighting falling off the sobriety wagon?

The seduction of successfully blocking out reality with alcohol or drugs haunted me every minute of every day, taunting me to give in. I wasn't bullshitting myself into thinking that one drink would help. I wanted the whole fucking bottle.

Yeah, I'd been through the Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous routine. More than once. I'd never made it past the first step in the twelve-step programs. I'd given my counselor the necessary assurance that I had so I could get the hell out of rehab. And I *could* admit that I was powerless in the face of alcohol and drugs. But that was it.

There was *no* sanity for me.

I *couldn't* give my shit over to a power greater than myself.

And I sure as hell had never made some kind of fearless and moral inventory of my actions. If I tried to search my soul, all I'd find was an all-consuming darkness.

My moral compass was all fucked up. The only thing keeping me from shooting up, popping some pills or swallowing a pint was my two older brothers. They'd been through enough, and they were finally happy. I didn't want my stupid ass to mess up their well-deserved peace. Julian and Micah had put up with enough of my bullshit—everything from overdoses to near-lethal alcohol limits that put me in the hospital or rehab.

I could take care of myself now, and I was trying to prove that point to them by staying sober and clean.

Even if it killed me.

And to be honest, I kind of felt like I was dying right now.

But I sure as hell didn't want a *babysitter*. The last thing I needed was somebody here in my house day and night.

I didn't particularly like company; I preferred to wallow in my misery alone.

A cook and a housekeeper? Why did I need to give a shit if my place wasn't a showplace? I wasn't exactly entertaining. I didn't have guests except my brothers, and occasionally Liam Sullivan.

"Housekeeper, my ass," I mumbled as I tossed an empty soda can toward the overflowing trash, not surprised when it bounced off the pile of rubbish and landed on the floor.

I ignored it, just like I always did.

Julian had mentioned some guy named Sam was coming over today, but I'd told him not to send him. I didn't want a roommate, even if the man cleaned and cooked. Did my brothers honestly think I was *that* stupid? I had no doubt my brothers wanted someone to watch over me, make sure I didn't fall off the wagon.

I didn't like people.

I didn't like loud noises.

And if I got hungry, I could eat a sandwich or something I could toss in the microwave.

The doorbell rang, and I hauled my ass off the couch reluctantly, hoping to hell my older brothers hadn't really followed through on their threat to send me a housekeeper. If they had, I'd send him packing. Or maybe he'd take one look inside the house and run away screaming. Either way, I'd make sure he had no delusions about working for me.

It wasn't happening.

I was accustomed to drowning in my despair alone, and that was the way I liked it.

I tripped over some junk on the way to the door, and kicked it aside as I made my way to the front entrance. Some small part of me wished it was one of my brothers or Liam. Damn! I

missed seeing Julian and Micah, but I was fucked up company right now.

I pulled the door open...then stood absolutely still as I saw the woman on my doorstep. It was impossible not to notice the wheeled suitcase she was dragging behind her.

My housekeeper?

No fucking way!

She was petite, but the curves of her delectable body were hard not to notice, especially for a guy who hadn't had sex in years. I'm not quite sure why my cock had suddenly sprung to life and was pressing urgently against the denim of my jeans, but there was something about this female that brought the appendage to attention. It hadn't happened in a long time, and it caused me to take a second look at her.

The woman was nothing like the chicks I'd dated in my past. She looked like the quintessential "girl next door." Her expressive face was almost devoid of makeup. The light-blond hair on her head was obviously confined behind her, but messy escapee locks framed her delicate face. When our gazes finally met, my gut ached like I'd been sucker punched.

Her eyes reminded me of the clear waters of the Caribbean on a perfect day, aquamarine and calm.

Or were they green?

Or were they blue?

It was a no to both answers, but a little of both. If I had to pick, I'd sway more toward blue.

I shook myself out of my stupid thoughts. *Holy fuck!* What the hell did I care what color this woman's eyes were? Especially since she was leaving immediately.

"Mr. Sinclair?" she inquired, her husky, confident voice making me harder. It was the kind of sexy voice I wanted to hear screaming my name while she was in the middle of a mind-blowing climax. If I didn't suspect she was sent to clean my house and cook me food, she could be making a fortune as a phone-sex operator.

“What do you want?” I asked belligerently. I was curious, but not enough to deal with somebody invading my space. I cursed my brothers for sending me a *female*. Not that I *wanted* a guy at my door. I actually didn’t want *anybody* here.

“I’m Sam. Your new housekeeper.”

“You’re not a guy.” It wasn’t a brilliant conclusion, but it *was* exactly what I was thinking.

She held a hand over her eyes, shielding her face from the sun. “I never claimed to be male,” she said calmly as she brushed by me to enter.

I had wanted to close the door in her face, but she’d been too stealthy. Not to mention the fact that when her body had briefly caressed mine, I’d been momentarily distracted. “You need to go. I told Julian not to send you here. And I sure as hell didn’t know that you were a *woman*.”

She calmly reached behind me and closed the door. “You’re letting the flies in. Judging by the smell of your house, I think it’s already a breeding ground for bugs.”

“I don’t care. Get. Out,” I told her, my teeth clenched together in irritation.

“Nope. Sorry. I need this job,” she answered as she pulled her suitcase through the foyer and into the family room. “God, you really are a pig.”

Intrigued, I followed her. Not once had she flinched at the nasty scars on my face. I had several, the two worst ones running from my temples and down both of my cheeks. “It doesn’t matter if the place is a mess. You won’t have to clean it up.”

She turned and put her hands on her curvy hips, causing the thin yellow sundress she was wearing to bunch up and show a little more of her bare legs. “I’m staying. I told you I need this job. You can either show me to my room, or I’ll find it myself.”

“Leave,” I said in a graveled, irritated tone.

She lifted an eyebrow. “Make me. What are you going to do? Throw me out on the doorstep? Go ahead. I’ll just sit out there until you let me in. Of course, it’s hot and humid, so I could get dehydrated. But I’m sure you’d call an ambulance once I lost consciousness.”

The woman was challenging me, and I knew it. “I won’t know. I wouldn’t worry about you.”

She wouldn’t really sit on my doorstep, right? I looked her up and down, noticing the determined tilt of her chin and stubborn expression, deciding she just might.

Turning her back on me, she left the family room and wandered around the bottom floor, dragging the suitcase behind her. I didn’t say a word as she explored, the disgusted look on her face saying everything she wanted to say out loud, but didn’t. Finally, she found the elevator to the top floor, stepped into it, then punched one of the buttons.

“Dinner will be at eight o’clock. I need to clean up the kitchen before I cook.”

“You need to leave...”

Before I could tug her out of my elevator and throw her bossy ass outside, the door to the lift *whooshed* closed.

“Goddammit!” I cursed her curvy blonde ass as I headed toward the stairs.

Maybe Sam the *woman* had surprised me, but she wasn’t about to best me. It was *my* house, and I didn’t want *her* here.

I hightailed it upstairs by taking the stairs, determined to get her out of my home before she even had a chance to see the bedrooms.

I need to get her out of here. I don’t want her around.

If she really thought she was staying, she was delusional.

There wasn’t a damn thing she could say to make me change my mind.

Chapter 3

Samantha

There was a time in my life when I'd loved Xander Sinclair's music. It had been my solace, my one guilty pleasure. His style had been unique, not quite metal, but expressive rock with some thoughtful ballads thrown into the mix.

His words had reached out and spoken to me when he sang. They'd touched my heart and gotten me through some of my darkest days.

Meeting him now, even several years after he'd recorded his last song, I couldn't believe the man and his music were so very different.

Shaking my head and longing for the days when Xander had been my hero, I walked into a bedroom, knowing immediately that it was a guest room. Everything was in its place, and it was tidy. Obviously, the owner had spent no time in this space.

Hefting my suitcase onto the bed, I tried to focus on what I needed to accomplish. Before I could get anywhere, I needed to clean up the mess Xander had made of the house. The place looked like a tornado had struck and nobody had ever done cleanup.

If I lived in a house this messy, I'd probably be depressed, too. My mild OCD with having everything organized and tidy might not always be healthy, but there was no way I could live in a place like this. Maybe I had my quirks, but I was well aware of them, and tried to keep them under control.

"I thought I told you to get your ass out of here?"

It wasn't like I wasn't expecting him, but Xander's husky voice still startled me. I knew very well that he was behind me, but I didn't turn around. I didn't react. I just started to open the zipper on my suitcase so I could unpack.

“I *heard* your request,” I admitted. “I’m just not *heeding* it. You need me. This is a beautiful home, and you’re completely destroying it. Your brother built this house for you. Don’t you want to take care of it?”

He moved closer. “I don’t give a shit. It’s just a place to live,” he growled. There was a hesitation before he asked, “How did you know he built it?”

“I got information from your brothers. I was warned. It’s not like I was sent here blindly. I already knew you were acting like an asshole. I knew what I was getting into. And judging by the state of this house, I *deserved* to know, and I’ll earn every penny they’re paying me.”

He moved closer, and I could see him cross his arms over his broad chest from the corner of my eye.

“So they told you I’m trying to recover? That I’m a drug addict and an alcoholic?”

“Yes.” I wasn’t starting this relationship with any more lies.

“Then why in the hell do you want to work here? Who wants to live with a miserable fuck like me?”

“Me,” I answered simply.

“Why?”

“I need a job. You need my services. The situation is perfect for both of us right now.”

“Jesus! Are you always this bossy?”

I bit back a smile. “Most of the time. And I don’t consider it *bossy*. I like to think I’m assertive.”

“You’re annoying as hell,” he said with a scowl.

It wasn’t the first time I’d heard somebody tell me that, so the insult didn’t hit home. It rolled right off my back quite easily.

I moved back and forth from the dresser and closet to my suitcase, putting away clothing. If Xander wanted me gone, he’d have to physically overpower me and throw me out. “You’re not exactly pleasant, either.”

That was putting it mildly. Xander was a jerk, but no matter how much he vented or grumbled, I was fairly certain he wasn't violent. He was a big man, and he could have very easily manhandled me out the door. But for some reason, he hadn't. Well, at least not yet.

"How much money do you need to leave?" he rumbled. "I'll pay it. I'll give you the cash just to get you the hell out of my house. I don't want you here."

I turned to him. "I don't want money for nothing. I can't take it. All I want is honest work. What do you care if I clean your house?"

His body was tense and defensive as he answered, "What female doesn't want money? I'm offering to pay you without you having to do the job. A year's pay. That's fair."

It was more than generous, which told me that Xander had a conscience, but it wasn't happening. I'd always had a good work ethic, and I wasn't leaving. I was staying here, no matter what it took to keep me from being thrown out bodily.

"I won't do it. I've never taken anything I didn't earn, and I'm not starting now," I answered stubbornly.

I sized him up now that I was facing him. Even with the scars on his face, he was still handsome. For me, the scars were a symbol of his courage, and just made him look more rugged and powerful. I was guessing he had a workout room somewhere in the home judging by his ripped appearance and powerful biceps. The T-shirt he was wearing did very little to hide how muscular he was, or that he was obviously in very good physical shape.

His hair was a little bit shaggy and long, and his jaw was covered in dark scruff. As I looked up at him, I could tell he was over six-foot tall. Usually, I wasn't the kind of woman who liked tattoos, but the intricate, black markings on his biceps actually suited him. His eyes were dark brown and currently angry as hell. Really, the whole Xander package should have been frightening, but he wasn't. Not to me.

I couldn't exactly put a finger on why he didn't scare me. It was completely gut instinct since he hadn't given me a single reason why I shouldn't be running away as fast as my little white sandals would carry me.

His voice was still belligerent as he said, "I don't want you here."

"So you've said. Then what *do* you want?" I asked. "You're obviously not happy."

"What the hell do you know about happiness?" he growled.

I knew quite a bit about it, actually. I'd spent most of my life without it, so I'd learned to appreciate every single bit of happiness I could get now that I was all grown up and in charge of my own life. "I know it isn't always easy to find," I confessed. "Xander, just let me stay. Give me a week. Tell me what you want, and I'll try to accommodate you."

"Enough whiskey to make me forget who I am."

"Can't do that."

"You asked what would make me happy," he argued.

"Think of something else. I'll cook. I'll clean."

"The only two things that I want right now are to get laid or get drunk or stoned."

I was ready for his comment. Over the course of my conversations with Micah and Julian, I knew that was often Xander's irritated response.

Time to call him on his statement. I couldn't give him the substances he wanted to escape, but I could grant his other wish. And I'd do it if it just kept me here for a while.

"Okay," I agreed compliantly, then turned back to my suitcase to finish unpacking.

"What do you mean by...okay?" His voice sounded slightly confused and taken aback. "What kind of response is that?"

I went to hang up a sundress, then went back for some jeans. "I agree. I can't give you the alcohol. But I get wanting

to have sex. It's a normal bodily urge for a guy your age. I get it."

"I'm glad you get some, because I don't," he said with a humorless laugh.

I ignored the fact that he'd misquoted the words I'd said. I reached into the back zipper pocket of my suitcase, and then turned back toward Xander again.

"Here." I shoved the box into his hand.

"What the hell is this?" He accepted it like it was a snake.

"Condoms. Safe sex."

He tossed the box back on the bed. "Keep it. No woman would have me right now."

"I will," I offered. "If you were to be nicer to me, I'd have sex with you. I find you attractive. But I don't do stinky guys who haven't showered."

His eyes grew wider as he stared at me like I was crazy. "Lady, you've got a problem."

I shrugged. "You think so? What's wrong with being honest? You'd be pretty hot if you'd shower and take care of yourself."

"What about all the things women care about?" He looked seriously confused as he gaped at me.

"Love? Dating? Flowers?"

"Yeah, yeah. *All* of that stuff? I don't do that stuff. I fuck. That's it." He shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"Guys have sex just for pleasure, right? Is it so bad that I'm willing to do the same thing?"

Actually, I *didn't* run around looking for a guy just to get laid, and every one of the few sexual encounters I'd had in my life had meant something to me. I didn't have no-strings-attached, casual sex. I'd never experienced the visceral, immediate reaction of my body the way it was responding to

Xander. I had a vibrator to satisfy my needs when I wasn't in a relationship. But I wasn't about to let Xander know that.

"All women want something," he grumbled.

"Not me. No strings attached. I just need sexual chemistry." It was every guy's dream, right? A woman who wanted nothing but sex? I knew Xander needed a whole hell of a lot more than that, but I'd start there.

"And you feel that? With me?" He sounded like he didn't believe what he was hearing.

My heart clenched as I recognized the slight vulnerability in his tone. I was attracted to him, and I wasn't all hung up on needing a committed relationship to have sex. My past had made me learn to never to take a single day for granted. Even though I'd never done it before, I was willing to try *no pressure* sex with Xander.

I was just that desperate for him to let me stay.

"Yes." I didn't elaborate.

"You realize you're crazy?" he asked hesitantly.

I smiled. "Maybe."

His lips twitched as he moved to the bed and picked up the box of condoms. "Magnum? Is that wishful thinking?"

I didn't answer.

"And why in the hell are you carrying around an economy sized box of rubbers?"

I still didn't answer.

To be honest, I was uncommonly uncertain *what* to say. Normally, I didn't carry a box of raincoats. It had been an impulse buy, a gut instinct before I came here, and I had no idea what was economy sized. Obviously, the box I'd bought was overkill.

Maybe I'd been hoping I'd meet a nice guy and have a fling while I was in a beach town where most people were hanging out to have a nice time. I'd definitely learned that even

committed relationships didn't always last, and weren't always good.

I shrugged. "Why not?"

He shook his head, but he kept the box as he headed toward the door. "You can stay. One week. We re-evaluate after that."

He didn't sound happy about the situation at all, but at least he wasn't going to throw me out of his house. Muscles that I didn't realize were tense suddenly relaxed. "Thanks."

"My decision has nothing to do with the sex," he added hastily.

"Of course not," I agreed. "And I haven't told you exactly when I'd decide to have sex with you. I'm waiting to see your kinder side."

"Then tell me now." His nostrils flared with irritation or something like it as he stared at me. "And just FYI...this *is* my nicer side."

"I can't tell you when we'll have sex. I only know I want to."

He turned and started to leave the room without saying a word.

"Where are you going?" I asked curiously.

Without turning back toward me, he mumbled, "To take a damn shower."

I let out a relieved breath as he disappeared from sight, wondering what the hell kind of devil's bargain I'd just made with Xander Sinclair.

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