



Bonfire

LAUREN MILSON

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The men in my books are fiercely protective and completely obsessed with their women. The women love everything their men want to give them. If that sound good to you — welcome. You are one of my people. You've come to the right place.

I can't be held responsible if your Kindle sparks, melts, or combusts. I'm happy to take responsibility if the same happens to your clothes.

Thank you for reading!



This book is dedicated to New York.

We have everything...

Niagara Falls (part of which is actually in Canada)

The Statue of Liberty (technically in New Jersey)

Sleepy Hollow (legit a real village in NY)

Amityville (erm...also legit)

The National Baseball Hall of Fame (ok cool)...

...which is thought to be haunted.

So I guess New York is just haunted.

That explains my ex-boyfriend.

Enjoy.

BONFIRE

It's Halloween week and my roommate is dragging me to a
bonfire party in the woods.

She didn't tell me the bonfire is part of a fake virgin sacrifice.

Or that I am the virgin to be sacrificed.

Or that this would entail me being tied to a tree.

The sacrifice is fake, but everything else is real. The ropes.
The virgin. The bonfire.

When the fire starts to burn out of control, everyone runs.
They leave me for dead, tied up and helpless.

But then a mysterious stranger emerges to save me, slashing
his way through the trees like a million strikes of lightning.

He unties my ropes but has no intention of letting me go.

This fiercely protective and obsessed older man wants to keep
me with him forever.

And I think I might let him...

Virgin sacrifice?

Sign me up...

*Want some heat but don't have any firewood? This hero will go
out and chop down a tree for you. Don't be shy about watching
as he rips his shirt off and beads of sweat slide down his chest.
He wants you to watch!*

Instalove, no cheating, HEA.

xx, Lauren

CHAPTER ONE

EMMA

I DON'T LIKE THIS.

I'm against trespassing.

"I promise that this is not trespassing," my roommate Katie says as she shines her flashlight on me.

I wince and put my hand over my eyes.

"How is this not trespassing?" I say as Katie swings her flashlight back to the path in front of us.

I step over some unlodged tree roots as she leads me toward the flickering orange flames up ahead. The sun is low in the sky, and the trees towering above us are casting long shadows.

"Hannah has a set of keys from when she used to feed the cat and water the plants of the guy who lives here. Or lived here. Or something."

"Lived here?" I ask. "How long ago was this?"

"Um, like, eight years ago?"

My heart drops, and my feet stop moving.

"And when was the last time she fed the cat?"

Katie just gives me a funny look.

“Seriously, when was the last time she fed the cat?” I say a little more desperately.

“That’s not important,” she says, laughing and swatting her hand at me as she looks over her shoulder.

“It is important,” I say as I run after her. “There is a statute of limitations when someone gives you a key to their house. It’s like, a year, max, and even then, you don’t just show up unannounced. And you definitely do not use the key for anything other than its intended purpose! We really shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Look,” she says as she marches over to me. She grabs me by the shoulders.

She’s smart and savvy, and that’s the only reason I came out here with her today. I’m not used to Halloween outside of NYC, and I wanted a taste of the local flavor.

Katie smiles and gives my shoulders a little shake.

“The guy is never around. No one has seen him in years. There are going to be streams and brambles and birds. This is the most beautiful wooded area in New York State. You’re the one who said you wanted to see the leaves changing color.”

I look up at the last of the orange and red leaves forming a canopy high above us. Most of the leaves are already on the ground. Some are even falling just while I stand here.

One of my favorite things to do growing up was taking a drive upstate with my mom to see the leaves change color. We had to stop when my mom’s car stopped running. We took the train up here a few times after that, but it was such a pain in the ass that it wasn’t worth it.

“It really is beautiful,” I say.

“That’s the spirit!” she says.

There are thick trees dotting the dense forest, and it’s hard to see anything beyond them, but there’s an ultra-modern house on a hill that I can make out a little way off in the distance.

We keep walking farther into the woods, and my mind feels more at ease. We get to the edge of the property where there’s a tall, gated fence and Katie’s friend Hannah waiting for us on the other side.

“Welcome,” she says seductively and tents her fingers under her chin, tapping them together like an old lady luring small, innocent children into her gingerbread house.

Katie takes off her backpack and throws it over the fence, then wedges the toe of her combat boot into one of the gaps in the twisted metal.

“Wait a second...” I say as my body breaks out in a cold sweat. “I thought you said there was a key to this place.”

“That was the only way to get you to come out here,” she says as she lands on the other side of the fence, her boots hitting the ground with a thud.

She smooths out her skirt and adjusts her fishnet tights.

“Was there ever a key?” I ask Hannah. “Do you actually know this guy?”

“Yes. I know the guy. But I haven’t seen him in years.” She shrugs.

“Come on,” Katie says, tugging on my sleeve. “Live a little.”

An owl hoots off in the distance, and a group of crows streak across the sky. There’s a frosty chill in the air that sends

a shiver up my spine and makes a strand of my dark brown hair flutter against my cheek.

“Come on,” Hannah says impatiently. “We’re burning daylight.”

She shines a flashlight under her chin and makes a face that’s supposed to look like a Scream mask.

“Come hither before the ghouls and goblins make haste to feast upon your mortal soul!”

“Don’t scare her,” Katie says as she hits Hannah’s arm with the back of her hand. She turns to me and smirks, crossing her arms and looking me up and down with a sassy look in her eyes. “She’s pure and innocent.”

“Huh,” Hannah says, clicking her tongue. “Pure and innocent, you say?”

“Oh yes. Totally.”

I roll my eyes and throw my backpack over the fence, then scale it and throw myself over as well. When I land, I look the girls straight in the eyes.

“We are leaving the second it gets dark. And if there is a chance, I mean any chance that this is going to be more than just basic college shenanigans, I am out of here.”

“Totally cool,” Hannah says as she puts her arm around my shoulders.

A few minutes later, the trees thin out, and we reach the little clearing. The bonfire is already set up, and there are a few logs around it for sitting. I walk over to a log and drop my bag, taking in the best scenery my humble state of New York has to offer.

“This is fabulous,” I say as I stretch my arms above my head. It’s nothing but a cloudless blue sky and trees all around us, with flames and curling smoke as the centerpiece.

There are two muscle-bound, bare-chested guys with neon war paint streaked across their abs and sheets tied into togas around their waists. There are a few girls here I recognize from my hall and say hello to.

I sit down on one of the logs, ready to make the most of the beautiful surroundings. I’m majoring in biology, and my passion has always been wildlife. I love watching the birds and cataloging them, always excited to find ones that are rare and entering them into a database run by one of the professors.

I grab my notebook and colored pencils from my backpack.

“Now,” one of the guys says, “have we the necessary provisions for the sacrifice?”

I look up from my notebook. Everyone is staring at me.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” I say, squinting up at the guy.

“In order to appease the gods, a burnt sacrifice must be made to bring order and peace back to the world!” he says theatrically. “We will require a virgin as an offering to please our almighty gods!”

“I’ve got your virgin right here!” Katie says as she grabs my hand and throws it into the air.

“Um, no,” I say as I snatch my hand back. “I’m good. I’m all set.”

“Come on!” Katie says, grabbing both of my hands and dragging me toward the fire. Everyone around us is cheering and clapping.

“Katie, I didn’t sign up for this!” I say as she guides me forward. I stumble, my feet uneasy beneath me. My boots are going to be caked with mud. I don’t like this.

“Oh, come on,” she says as we get right up to the bonfire. She grabs a length of rope from her purse and holds it up, tapping her long fingernails against it. “It’s a bonfire and it’s Halloween weekend. What did you expect?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I say as two girls grab my hands and pin them behind my back. “S’mores?”

I try to wrestle away from them, but their grip is too strong. It’s two against one. I’m outnumbered, and I’m not very strong. I’m curvy, and one time a guy told me I was built like a brick house but that’s not accurate at all. I’m more like a house of cards.

“Come on,” Katie says. “It’s not real. It’s just for fun.”

“Then you do it!” My eyes flash around at everyone. “Or someone else!”

She looks at me with a little smirk. “You’re the only one here still carrying the v-card around at twenty years old.” She steps toward me. “That’s kind of a prerequisite for this.”

They grab my wrists and pin them behind me, then I’m pulled to the tree and pushed up against it.

“I don’t like this!” I say, twisting against the ropes to no avail.

The harder I try to get out of them, the more they rub against my wrists and start to burn. I’m going to need a freaking metric ton of lotion to get my hands soft again after this.

I'm still writhing and thrashing as the guys lock my ankles together and bind them with more rope. Then a longer piece of the frayed, thick twine is fastened around me to bind me to the tree.

"You're doing my laundry for two weeks to pay me back for this," I say to Katie.

"Fine," she says, crossing her arms.

"And you're cleaning the microwave."

Everyone lets out a collective gasp.

"But you know that microwave is haunted," Katie hisses in a soft voice as she creeps over. "It's like every time one of us tries to clean it, it just gets dirtier."

I raise my chin at her.

"Damn it," she says. "Fine."

I try to get loose, just to test out the strength of the ropes. My heart flips when I feel how tight they really are.

I guess I just need to accept my fate with open arms—or with my arms tied behind my back, I guess.

It's not like I have any other choice.

CHAPTER TWO

EMMA

THE RINGLEADER—LIKE IN THE CIRCUS, BECAUSE I KIND OF feel like I'm part of a circus sideshow right now—raises a piece of wood into the sky and touches it to the bonfire with a ceremonial flourish.

He brandishes it around me with in a wave and says some secret incantation.

“Is that pig Latin?” I say as I give the ropes a little tug.

“We now invoke the ancient rite of the goddess igbay armaphay, who will reign over this mortal coil like the cold November rain from the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters!”

“This is starting to sound like a TikTok mashup,” I say with a shudder. “Now that’s scary.”

Katie laughs. “Don’t pretend you don’t love this,” she says.

“In theory, I think it’s cool.” I pull against the ropes. “In practice, it’s not cool to spring this on someone.”

Maybe part of me does. I broke out the black nail polish at one minute after midnight on October 1 and started my 30 nights of horror with a Steven King book on my phone every night before bed. I wish I could read more, but my classes are

kicking my ass so hard that I fall asleep almost immediately after my head hits the pillow.

“We must now complete the sacrifice by setting ablaze our pure, untouched friend, who will now bring peace to the world that hasn’t been felt in the last two thousand years.”

Katie runs over with a handful of candy corn and sprinkles them on me, I guess to imitate fire.

Everyone gets on their knees and bows down before me. It could be worse. If I’m gonna die a virgin, this could be the way to do it: with the adoration of my peers.

I squeeze my eyes shut and stick my tongue out, pretending to be dead. That’s what you do when you say Bloody Mary three times in the mirror, so that’s what I’m doing. I have to improvise here because I am in uncharted territory. I’ve never pretended to be dead before.

“Oh, shit,” I hear Katie say.

I open my eyes as there’s a scuffle around me. “What’s going on?”

I whip my head in the direction everyone’s looking, to see a dude on the back deck of that house in the distance, illuminated from behind with light coming through the windows. He’s a shadow, an apparition, a silhouette framed in light.

“I thought you said he’s never around!” I say as I struggle against the ropes in a panic.

“Shit,” Katie says, grabbing her bag and shoving her hoodie inside. “Shit, shit.”

Everyone takes off running except for Katie.

She races over and tugs at the ropes, crouching on the ground to untie the ones binding my ankles. My heart is pounding so freaking hard and my fingers are shaking. I rub my wrists together to try to loosen the ropes with friction, but those guys really did a number on me.

“Why did they do this so tight?” I hiss. “*How* did they do this so tight?”

“I think those guys are into BDSM or something, I don’t know,” Katie says.

She pulls out a switchblade, and my eyes grow wide. She flips it open to reveal the shiny blade reflecting the light from the fire.

“Our bare hands weren’t cutting it,” she says as she carefully starts sawing at the rope. “No pun intended.”

The guy from the house starts walking down the steps from his porch. He’s moving slowly. He’s cloaked in shadows from the porch light. The sky is darker than I thought. The fire is making everything around us glow, but beyond our little area, it may as well be midnight.

A flock of ominous birds circles overhead. The only thing that could make this worse would be one of them swooping down and stealing our candy corn.

“Hurry up,” I yell. “He’s coming!”

“I’m trying to do this as fast as I can without hitting a major artery,” she says with panic in her voice.

I writhe against the restraints as the guy gets closer. My long hair is whipping around my head in giant swoops that make him look like he’s walking toward me through a long, dark hallway with all kinds of bats and spiders swarming around.

I always loved my unruly, thick hair. Now it's just framing this guy's death-stare as he walks toward us.

He's walking slowly, like a serial killer would. A serial killer can outrun you, even if he's just walking. These movie villains have the uncanny ability to get closer and closer even if you're running away like a bat out of hell. And this guy fits the bill.

"Any luck?" I say, looking down at the work Katie's doing.

"Fuck," she mutters. "No luck."

She looks over at the guy, and her eyes grow as wide as two big, bright moons.

"Girl, I'm sorry, I love you, but I have to get out of here," she says, backing away without taking her eyes off the guy.

"You are not just leaving me here!" I give my body one more big twist, and the rope burns my wrist badly enough to take me out of commission.

"If I get in trouble again, my dad is going to kill me," she says as she grabs her backpack. "I'll have to drop out. Then you'll have no one to clean the microwave!"

"I'm not going to need a microwave if I'm dead!"

"I thought the microwave was haunted, right?" She shoves her hoodie into her backpack and swings it over her shoulder. "If I don't see you again, I hope you come back as a ghost to fuck up our microwave."

"You are not leaving me here to die alone on this hill!" I scream.

"He's just some rich, lonely, weird, mysterious dude," she says, still backing away. "You'll be totally fine."

I make one final, painful tug on the ropes.

Then I watch in horror as my backpack gets blown open and my notebook flutters out. The pages are like leaves.

And when they get close enough to the flames, they become kindling for the fire.

The whole thing whooshes up into the sky, angrier and hungrier than before.

It isn't coming for me yet, but just like the scariest villains, sometimes they're the ones you least expect.

"Happy, gods?" I yell. "I'm a virgin set aflame to bring order back to the world. In return for my soul, I pray that you resolve the global supply-chain disaster of 2022!"

That's a noble goal. Last month when Aunt Flo arrived, I drove around to five different stores and couldn't find any supplies.

Then it hits me. I'm never gonna have my period ever again. I'm never gonna have kids. Or a man who loves me. It's crushing.

I pull on my restraints with new ferocity, digging deep into my inner strength, running on pure adrenaline, but the fire is getting closer as I struggle to escape.

I glance over at the guy. He's still coming toward me, but until just a second ago, he seemed to be walking slowly.

Now he's walking faster.

"Help!" I scream as the flames catch on some more dry leaves. At some point, someone must have spilled some alcohol near here because there is some kind of accelerant pushing the path of flames toward my feet.

They scramble back against the tree as I look up.

Maybe I can shimmy up this thing. Head to higher land.

But it wouldn't be higher land. I'd have a huge drop with the white-hot fiery ground to catch me.

I look to my left and wonder what's taking the guy so long to get to me. But now he isn't stalking forward slowly. Now he's running. He's broken out into a wild sprint as he dodges branches and uses tree trunks to grab on and maneuver himself down the hill.

He's wearing a white dress shirt and slacks with a black tie and jacket. I guess he didn't have time to put on the right outfit to transform himself into a proper mountain man running to rescue the poor damsel about to be devoured by flames.

The guy skids down a patch of hill where the ground is muddy, falls back on one hand, then grabs on to a branch and leaps his way forward into a narrow streak of sunlight cutting through the mighty, tall trees.

He races for the fire, tearing the jacket from his shoulders, making the seams pull and rip as he throws it on the flames. He wrangles the fire like a man wrangling a horse at the rodeo. He stomps on the fire to pummel the frightening lure of the licking, smoldering flames to their unnatural, untimely death.

The fire starts to burn his jacket, but he doesn't seem to care at all.

He runs to me. He dives. It's a surreal moment, having someone else in total control, with pure and absolute power over what's about to happen to me.

I'm having an out-of-body experience. Maybe I'm already dead.

I jolt when I see his face, the way he moves with such exact, succinct, focused precision.

Maybe I am dead after all. Maybe I'm in heaven.

His eyes are squarely on my bound feet. He grips the rope with both hands, a fist-length apart, and with one heavy tug, the rope breaks and frays at the ends with the strength of his force.

This guy's bare hands are more effective than a knife.

I kick my legs, and the torn rope falls to the ground.

"Thank you," I whisper as I look down at him.

His eyes are huge and green, and they widen when he looks at me. His lips are slightly parted, the kissable bulls-eye on a ruggedly handsome face. His dark brown hair and beard are threaded through with silver. He's slightly past the stage of starting to go gray—he is gray, mostly, and he's just gorgeous.

"You're going to be okay. I'm getting you out of here."

Of course, all of this happens in a split second, and then I'm back to my chief concern: this guy getting me the hell out of here. His eyes return to the rope around my torso, not binding my wrists or ankles together, instead making my spine like the smaller, softer, but scrappier twin to the tree's thick, worn, jaded trunk.

He goes straight for ripping this rope off me with his bare hands again. This guy has no time to be messing around with knots. He isn't me, two hours ago, trying to delicately untangle the chain of my moonstone necklace I was hell-bent on wearing tonight.

He's a ferocious beast, clawing at my threads and igniting a fire far more powerful than anything made with some mere

tree branches and leaves.

“Thank you,” I whisper as my gaze meets his. I kick away the fragments of rope and shake off the ones still loose on my arms. I start to turn away when he grabs my hand and pulls me back.

“No,” he says as his eyes focus on mine. There’s clarity in them that’s so much more powerful than the fire. “You’re coming with me.”

“I don’t even know you!” I yell as I back away.

“I am a doctor,” he says, putting his hands on his knees. We’re face to face now. I could run, I could scream, I could race after the people who put me in this situation—or I could accept help from this beautiful man.

“Are you a doctor every other night of the year, or just for Halloween?” I say as I look him up and down.

If he’s a real doctor, he’d know how to make it look like my death was an accident. If he’s not a real doctor, he’ll know how to make it look like I was never here.

“I’m wearing a tux, miss,” he says. “This is clearly not a costume.”

“So you aren’t a real doctor???”

He huffs and pulls an ID card out of his pocket.

There’s his picture. It has the name of a hospital on it. He’s the real deal.

“Okay,” I whisper as I look up at my savior.

“Okay.”

Without emotion, without ceremony, the man lifts me into his arms. My heart is still pounding. I put my hand on his

chest. His heartbeat is as steady as a metronome.

He pushes his way through the trees again until we get to a set of stairs. They are steep and modern and contour to the shape of the hill, leading up to the balcony of the house. He carries me every step of the way.

He sets me down on a plush chair on the porch, and I wince, stroking my scratched wrists.

The man crouches down in front of me and takes my face in his hands, his earnest, dark green eyes scanning my face as his jaw ticks.

“You are not doing anything like that ever again.”

His thumb caresses my cheek, and my lips part. All of the pain and sting on my pulse points seems to fade away.

I nod my head slowly.

It’s an everlasting, eternal vow.

To a man I don’t even know.

CHAPTER THREE

EMMA

THE HOUSE IS BIG AND OPEN AND BROWN, SOFT TOUCHES among clean lines with double-high ceilings and windows everywhere, some with their slated blinds open to allow the view of the majestic, rolling black-red hills, and other blinds closed, casting shadows and light in alternating beams across the room.

He carries me through the house until we get to a bathroom at the end of a dark, wide hallway.

“Please,” he says, guiding me to the edge of the tub. “Sit.”

“Do they hurt?” he asks, looking at my wrists that are a little scraped up. He pulls a pair of glasses from his shirt pocket. He puts them on and rotates my hands, turning them face up and then face down.

He crosses the bathroom and grabs a first aid kit from under the sink.

“Oh, I don’t think I need anything heavy-duty,” I say as he comes back to me. “Just some Band-Aids.”

He looks at my wrists and wipes them with an alcohol pad, and the sting makes me take my hand away.

“It’s all right,” he says. “Stay still.”

He's so focused. It's almost like I'm not even here. He seems dedicated to his craft, like a pianist in a jazz club who steps away from his instrument and sees that everyone has already gone home.

It wasn't because they didn't like his music. It was because the club had to close for the night. He was so focused that he didn't realize the lights had turned off, all of the other musicians had gone home, and the audience had been forced to leave.

I look into the little first aid kit he has open between us.

"Wow," I say, "this is some heavy-duty stuff."

My eyes land on a pair of scissors and something that looks like pliers. A tiny pair of pliers. My stomach drops as he takes them from the case. His thick, tattooed forearms are like a weapon in their own right. I saw what they did to those ropes. But the pliers are an accessory every good doctor-turned-serial killer needs.

"Oh God," I say as I scramble away from him. My chest is heaving up and down. "Are you going to pull my nails out one by one with those things? Are you going to rip my eyelashes out? Do you have a monster somewhere that you've constructed with different body parts from the people you've killed?"

He holds them up and laughs.

"Miss, these are tweezers."

"Oh."

"I swore an oath when I became a doctor," he says and smiles. At me. With his eyes right on mine, softly, gently. Like I'm the only person in the world. "It was an oath to the Greek god Apollo that I would abide by the ethics of care."

“Huh,” I say curiously. “For real?”

I guess we’re both trying to please the gods tonight.

“Yes, for real,” he says as he huffs out a laugh. He puts his hand on my forearm. “I’ll take good care of you.”

That touch lights me up like nothing has before. His touch shoots right into my brain, into my heart, between my legs. I can feel it. I clamp my knees together and suppress a whimper.

His eyes soak me up, and I revel in it. He lets out a deep, sharp breath as his eyes stay on mine for an extra beat. Then he goes back to fixing me up.

With precision, he wipes my other wrist with an alcohol pad. I let out a little gasp. It stings.

“Almost done,” he says. He wraps some gauze around my wrists and tapes it in place.

It feels so good to be taken care of by this man.

“I really need to know why you’re here,” he says as his green eyes swim. It’s like there’s a storm inside them.

“I’m here because you brought me here, remember?”

“No,” he says as he pulls off his glasses. “What the hell happened back there?”

I sigh. “It was a prank. A stupid, stupid prank.”

“So they did that to you,” he says, his voice hitching in the back of his throat. “Without your permission?”

“Yeah. And it went really sideways, really fast.”

He looks so pissed-off. Like he’s going to go kill the people who did this to me.

“You are not going back to those people,” he says slowly. “And I’m not going to leave you.”

“Oh,” I say, exhaling with a little tremble. I swallow thickly. “I’m relieved. I thought the next words out of your mouth would be some combination of ‘punks,’ ‘kill,’ and ‘not in my backyard.’”

“If I were going to kill them, I wouldn’t want there to be any witnesses,” he rasps as he looks me up and down. “And since I’m not letting you get away from me...”

A shiver runs through me. My mouth becomes dry as a trickle of wetness glides through my folds. I sit helpless in front of him, my nipples twisting and seeking out the hard, rough contours of his chest under his shirt. I breathe in deeply as his hot, pure-sex scent winds its way through my brain and makes my body feel like I could just melt into the tub.

“Thanks,” I say in a low breath.

He comes over and puts his hand out.

“I’m Adrian,” he says.

“Emma.”

I stand up, and our eyes remain locked on each other’s. I feel like a queen rising to rule over her land with her king by her side, both ready to protect each other from the evils that lurk in the shadows.

Is it too soon for me to ask if this can be our couples’ costume next year?

“I should probably go,” I say as reality hits me.

This is not my house. This is not my boyfriend. There’s no use in asking him about a couples costume for next year. After today, I’ll probably never see him again.

“Absolutely not,” he says. I swallow thickly and nod.
“Now come on. We need to get you warm and rested.”

CHAPTER FOUR

ADRIAN

A WARM SWELL OF PRIDE CLENCHES AROUND MY HEART LIKE A gentle fist.

She's perfect.

I think I might be in love.

But there's also anger inside me. Disgust.

I look out through the glass doors on the main floor of the house. That forest tried to take her from me before I even found her. Those asshole kids could have done serious damage. Someone could have even been killed.

Everything around me got fuzzy when I spotted her. The fire became as small as a candle. The tree looked like a splinter. She was the only thing I could see. The one and only thing that mattered. Everything else was blotted out.

When her friends ran away and the fire started to burn out of control, I blacked out and went into auto-pilot. I lost all sense of myself, and I was just in beast mode, tearing through the forest to get to her.

From far away, all I could see was a vague figure immobilized, bound in place, helpless. When she yelled for help, there was panic in her voice that I've never heard before. When I was an emergency room doctor, I had people wheeled

through the ER door begging for my help, but this was different.

Hearing her scream for me felt different.

Like I was the only person in the world who could save her.

Like I was the one solely responsible for her.

Like she was mine.

“You don’t have a TV here?” she says as she walks in a circle around the living room.

“No, sorry about that,” I say.

“Oh, that’s totally okay,” she says. She runs her hand along the back of the sofa. “If I lived in a house like this, I wouldn’t want a TV, either. I’d just bird-watch, work on my sketches, sit in front of a roaring fire, or study. I really hope I can live in a house like this someday.”

“I’m absolutely sure you will,” I say. “Are you an artist?”

“Not really,” she says. “I’m studying biology. I’ve always been interested in learning how things work, and we’ll never know exactly how life works.” She shrugs. “That’s why it’s so intriguing.”

She’s the thing that’s intriguing. She’s the most intriguing thing I’ve ever seen.

I glance over at the fireplace as a strange, protective, primal streak runs through me.

No firewood.

This won’t do.

I smile as I jog to the door.

“Wait right here.”

“Where are you going?” she shouts after me.

“If you want to sit in front of a roaring fire, then we’re gonna need some wood.”

I head out to the deck and bound down the stairs. There’s a shed back here that the former owners left. I rumble toward it and tear the door open. My eyes land on an axe—a big, shining blade catching the reflection of the setting sun.

I grab the handle and set the axe free of the nails it was hanging on.

“Adrian, are you serious?” Emma says as she leans over the railing of the deck with her eyes wide and her lips spread into a huge smile.

“I am absolutely serious,” I say as I grip the handle, my mind set on one thing.

“You’re wearing the wrong clothes!” she laughs.

“I don’t care,” I holler over my shoulder.

“Oh my God, yes! Go Adrian, the doctor with the axe!” she shouts. “I love it! He’s coming alive!”

She’s absolutely fucking right I’m coming alive.

“If you want a fire,” I shout over my shoulder, “then I’m giving you a fire.”

She’s still cheering me on as I grip the handle with pride. I throw her a smile, and her eyes light up like two huge, blue twin moons.

I know what I have to do.

I’m going to chop down the tree my helpless Emma was tied to. I don’t want anyone to touch it ever again. It’s sacred.

It's mine now. And I'm going to burn it.

I make my way down the rest of the stairs, taking two at a time and grabbing on to a big rock, hauling myself past thick branches.

I spot something on the ground near where the fire was. It's a black canvas backpack that's been burned badly, and there are drawings and a notebook on the ground near it. I crouch down to see what all of this is. The drawings are beautiful.

I look up to see Emma looking at me intently. These must be her sketches. A few of them seem to have been lost in the fire, and some have survived with just the corners singed away, but there are many more that are intact, either etched on pages of the notebook or loose sheets tucked inside the bag, but they're here.

This is very fine work. Detailed sketches of birds, moss, trees, seashells. I grab the notebook and shuffle the loose pages together, putting everything in my back pocket to return to Emma.

I look over my shoulder one more time to see her standing on the deck, hands on the banister, standing on her tip-toes in those sexy combat boots with her wild raven-black hair blowing behind her.

Now that she's in my house, she isn't leaving.

I'm gonna make her want to stay here for fucking ever.

I've never even had a woman inside this house. I always took that as some kind of huge sign, something that meant I'd never have a partner to share my life with. I was okay with it because my life was dedicated to helping people. That has always been my true pride and joy.

Up until this morning, I had everything I even wanted. Now with Emma in my life, I know I was dead fucking wrong.

I may have untied her from those ropes, but that doesn't mean I have any intention of letting her go.

I grip the handle, steady myself, and make the first blow.

CHAPTER FIVE

EMMA

I RACE TO THE BALCONY SO I CAN WATCH ADRIAN IN ALL OF his glory.

He doesn't belong here. He belongs in the pages of a magazine. A cover story. New York's rising stars in the medical field. He would be on the cover, pulling on a pair of surgical gloves the same deep green color as his eyes. Maybe he has a stethoscope slung around his shoulders and he's giving a panty-wetting, open-lipped smile with a little crinkle in his brow.

But my God, he looks so gorgeous. He *does* belong here. Behind the sexy, thick-framed glasses and the sharp dress shirts, he's a true rugged, hot-as-hell mountain man.

I watch in awe as he lifts the axe high in the air, gripping it with white-knuckled fists.

My heart is fluttering as I watch him cleave the tree trunk with the sharpened edge of the blade. The sky is red and orange beyond the trees. The axe seems to be shining from every direction, blazing.

This man is chopping down a tree for me. Just to satisfy my romantic notion of cuddling up on the sofa with a gorgeous man in front of a crackling fire.

Then it hits me. He isn't cutting down just any old tree. He's cutting down the exact same tree that I was tied to. I can't even believe he found it among all the others, but now that I see it, I know it's the one.

A tear stings the corner of my eye. I've never felt more protected. More safe.

The tree begins to wobble as he strikes the mark he made with the first few swings. He swings, and the blade makes contact, making some of the gnarly bark fall to the ground. He puts his foot at the bottom of the trunk and pulls his blade free, then wipes his forehead with the back of his hand.

He shields the red-hot setting sun from his eyes and searches through the trees to see me. His eyes connect with mine, and I feel a jolt of energy electrify my heart.

He smiles and drops the axe, peeling off his shirt and letting it fall to the ground, among the rubble and ash of the fire he extinguished to save me—body and soul.

My heart is pounding as my core starts to thicken. I'm feeling lightheaded and woozy because all of the blood in me is rushing away from my brain and heading right between my legs.

He wipes his forehead again in slow motion, allowing me—nay, encouraging me—to openly ogle him. My body is vibrating with the nonstop thrumming of my beating heart. It's working overtime to get blood to all of my organs.

If this guy really is an axe-murderer instead of a doctor, he could rip my heart out and it would have his name stamped on it.

The trunk is nearly split in two, exposed and splintered, as I witness its swift and righteous destruction.

The air has a chill to it, but I'm totally burning up. My hair tangles through a breeze, and I brush it over my shoulders so I can keep witnessing the battle between nature and man.

His forearms flex with the images of faded tattoos, lines more powerful than the rings of the tree, veins on his neck articulating themselves in slow motion like the veins on the underside of a red and orange leaf. A sheen of sweat gathers at his brow, slicker with each chop, until the tree is split and falls through the air with a swish and then onto the dry forest ground with a defeated thump.

And my wild mountain man stands there, feet askance, arms hulking, chest exposed, his eyes set securely on mine as a group of crows streaks across the sky.

He sets his sights once more on the fallen tree, carving a slash through the stump and chipping away at the last remnants of its life.

He cuts away pieces of the trunk and drops them on his dirt-matted shirt, scooping them into the center and then tossing the parcel over his shoulder with his thick, masculine hands.

Is this man the reason I've been a virgin for nineteen years? The reason I've waited? Is he the man I've been waiting for?

I was the only nineteen-year-old virgin they could find back at the dorm. Is this some strange twist of fate? Is he the man I've been saving myself for? Was I brought out here for a bigger reason? For some higher purpose?

I look around. I've never felt more perfect, more complete.

Adrian bounds up the stairs with the lumber wrapped in his dirty shirt, slung over his shoulder, making him the sexiest

thing I've ever seen. Hot sex on two legs with a rugged chest that's beaming with slick perspiration.

My body glows with intensity, the heat between my legs unbearable and the wobble in my knees about to take me down.

Adrian looks me dead in the eyes and drops the parcel of wood at my feet.

"I got this for us."

"Is that..." I ask, just to make sure, "is that the tree I was tied to?"

"You're damn fucking right it is," he rasps.

Has there ever been a man more gorgeous and brilliant than him? Someone I can count on? Someone more perfect and amazing and absolutely tailored to me?

Is it too good to be true?

As I look up at him, I feel my nipples twisting into tight peaks. Searching out his rough chest, aching to be touched by him.

Only him. I want him to be the only man who ever loves me. Who touches me. Who kisses me.

"Nothing, and no one, will ever hurt you again."

He takes one broad step toward me, erasing the distance between us and kicking the wood out of the way.

His chest is rising and falling like he's about to tear right through his own skin and ravage the entire mountain.

He could ravage me right now.

And I would let him.

I look at the chopped wood in admiration.

I have witnessed the destruction of the thing that tried to take me down, tried to wrestle my body from my eternal soul.

Does this mean I owe Adrian everything?

My body and soul?

I bite the corner of my lip.

I think it might.

He grabs some logs, takes my hand, and pulls me inside.

“Let’s go make a fucking fire.”

CHAPTER SIX

EMMA

“LET’S GO MAKE A FUCKING FIRE.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me inside. He doesn’t stop pulling me until he’s sitting me down on the couch and he’s crouching in front of the fireplace.

The logs are dirty and they’re making the pristine white carpet get soil and moss all over it, but he doesn’t seem to care.

I tuck my knees up and watch as this glorious man makes me a fire.

“You know what all of those pieces of wood make me think of?” I say as I keep my eyes on him, softly roaming over every inch of his body.

“What do they make you think of?” he says, not turning to look at me.

“They’re kind of like the biggest bouquet of flowers I’ve ever seen.”

He huffs out a laugh as he keeps adding wood to the fire.

The light is flickering, and it’s almost completely dark out now. The shadows being thrown onto the walls are romantic and beautiful.

And so is he.

I spot an open door on the other side of the living room. It's calling to me. I want to know everything about this guy. First he fought one fire for me and now he's making a new one. Is there anything this man can't do?

My eyes light up as I step inside.

I look at the diplomas lining the walls. This must be his office.

"Columbia...Princeton..."

This guy is the real deal.

"I guess you really are a doctor," I shout to him. I spot a diploma from Harvard. A photo of him shaking hands with a couple of recent presidents.

"Yeah," he says, "I'm a real doctor. Did I not convey that to you when I was saving your ass?"

I close my eyes and let out a deep breath as I go back to the living room. I'm going to be so wet by the time this evening is over.

He's still down on one knee, putting scraps of wood into the fireplace, and he looks so good doing it.

I notice a photo on the mantle and pick it up carefully.

It's a photo of a beautiful woman smiling, her long blond hair tucked behind her ears. It looks like a candid photo. She isn't looking at the camera and seems to be sharing an inside joke with someone who isn't in the picture.

"Hey," I say, "who is this?"

"That's my daughter," he replies.

“She’s stunning,” I say. “I can see the family resemblance.”

He huffs out a laugh. “I’m flattered, but any resemblance is purely coincidental.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s adopted.”

“Oh,” I say. “And are you married?”

“No,” he says, “never been married. It’s really just been me and Natasha since her parents passed away.”

“Where does she live?”

“She is in California now. That’s where I was until just a couple of months ago, too.” He pauses. “But I’ll be here for the foreseeable future. I just accepted a new position at a clinic a couple of towns over.”

“Ah,” I say, “and that’s why my idiotic friends said you were never around.”

“Is that what landed you all here?”

“Yeah,” I say. “It sure is.”

His fist tightens around a piece of wood, and he shoves it into the fire.

“I’m going to have to build a higher fence.”

I put the frame down as my eyes drift over to him all on their own.

Why is this man single?

I’m just...in awe of him.

Every little thing about him is so incredible. He’s kind and strong and a total badass. He’s also building me a fire with a

tree he chopped down himself to avenge me.

He doesn't need to know why I was out there tied to it, right? I want to tell him. I want to pour my heart out to him. But it's too personal. Too much information to share with someone I've just met.

I'm so relieved that he doesn't have a wife or girlfriend. I would hate to be taking him away from his partner. I'd want him to be taking care of them instead.

I go back to watching him. His chest is covered with a sheen of sweat as he adds more wood to the fire. The crackling light is making shadows dance across the walls.

He looks so sexy in this light. My eyes trail over every inch of him.

He looks up, his eyes soft and dreamy.

A cascade of warmth flows through me as his eyes drink me up. I'm doing the same to him.

He takes a beat then walks down a hallway off the living room. I hear a door open and close gently, like he's trying to make as little noise as possible.

"Here," he says, coming back and handing me a huge, puffy blanket. "I want you to be warm and comfortable."

He tucks the blanket around my shoulders and guides me to the sofa. It makes a chill run up my spine.

"I'm already warm," I say.

"I just want to make sure."

"What made you want to become a doctor?" I say as he sits in the big chair opposite me. "What's the story behind it?"

“No story,” he says as he smiles and leans over to stoke the fire, one hand on his knee. “I wanted to help people. I’m good at science.” He looks over at me with intensity in his eyes, like he’s divulging some big secret, something that won’t appear on any resume. “And when someone needs me, I will move heaven and earth to help them. Every time.”

I blush and look away, letting out a yawn as I lean back on the sofa. It’s so soft. I’m just realizing now how tired I am. Adrian had my adrenaline ramped up to 100 percent but now that I’m all cozy, my eyelids feel like lead. I could float off into a dreamy sleep right here and now.

He leaves again and returns with his laptop, sitting down and putting on his thick-rimmed glasses.

“You’re staying here with me?” I say.

“I told you I wasn’t letting you out of my sight.”

My heart is gonna explode out of my freaking chest.

I cuddle up in my blanket and watch the fire, my heart totally ablaze.

This is just perfect.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ADRIAN

I KEPT WATCH OVER HER ALL NIGHT.

She fell asleep quickly, and I didn't want to wake her. I didn't want to move her into a guest room. She just looked too damn beautiful. Too incredibly peaceful.

I did some work, sent a few emails, and inquired about a few things I needed to attend to at the hospital where I worked back in California, but I was so distracted by the beauty sleeping just a few feet from me.

I closed my eyes a few times, imagined going to her and wrapping her up in my arms, making her mine, claiming her, kissing her, sliding myself inside her sweet, sexy little body, but I feel like she needs to be pampered a little. Spoiled. I want to keep her here, and I want her to stay not because all of her other options are shit, but because I'm her first choice.

She's my first choice. She's my only choice.

And I won't just be an option for her, a choice among many.

Every time I think back to the fire, I discover new things. The way her eyes lit up when she saw me. The way they switched from skepticism to admiration to gratitude and then to affection.

I must have fallen asleep a few times, but every time I looked over at her, she was in a slightly different position. Curled up in the blanket that I'm never going to wash again. Lying on her back with her hand resting near her forehead, those plump lips accentuated by the flickering of the fireplace.

I wanted to have my eyes on her all night, just sit there and watch her without a single intermission, but I would have felt like an absolute fucking asshole.

And what if she had woken up to see this old guy watching her as she slept?

She'd run out of here in two seconds. Call the cops. Report me for being too obsessed. For falling for her too hard and too fast.

I put my hand over my chest. Is that what's happening? Am I falling for her?

Maybe I've already fallen.

I lean forward on my knees where I'm sitting on the back porch. I check the time. I want her to come out here and join me. I have a few things planned.

Right on cue, as though she can read my mind, I hear the door slide open behind me.

"Hey," she says. My heart jolts into my throat, and my cock springs up on sight.

"Good morning," I say, turning to capture the image of her stepping through the door.

She looks so beautiful as she seems to walk in slow motion. She's changed into some sweatpants and a T-shirt I left for her by the bathroom. She looks absolutely amazing, her modest breasts pushing up against the shirt and the

sweatpants hanging low on her curvy hips, rolled up a few times so she isn't tripping on them. Her alabaster skin is smooth and flawless, and her dark hair is pulled into a knot on the top of her head.

"I made this for you," she says as she sits down next to me and hands me a mug.

"You didn't have to do that," I reply. "I got some Danish and coffee this morning. Didn't you see it in the kitchen?"

"Oh, I did," she says. "But this is a special tea I made from ground oak bark, some mushrooms I foraged, and the tears of the gods."

"Is it going to cast a spell on me?" I say.

She's already cast a spell on me. I'm dizzy in her presence.

"Just drink it and find out," she says.

She brings her mug to her lips and takes a sip. She licks the corner of that delectable mouth and sits back in her chair, admiring the forest with me.

"It's good. You really should try it," she says with a raised eyebrow. "If you dare."

"Oh, it's on," I say, taking a big sip with my eyes on hers. "Tastes surprisingly like coffee."

"You figured me out," she says. "It's coffee."

I lean forward and pull the notebook I found out of my back pocket.

"Hey," I say, leaning toward her with my elbows on my knees. "I found this last night. I think it belongs to you."

"Oh my God," she breathes, getting closer as her eyes shift from the notebook to my eyes. I hand it over. "Thank you. I

thought it was gone.”

She looks up at me with gratitude in her eyes. It’s making my heart swell.

“I tried not to look inside, but a few of the pages were sticking out, so I couldn’t help it.”

“I don’t usually show people these,” she says as she holds the notebook to her chest, “but I’m happy you saw them.”

“I also got you a little something,” I say, grabbing a paper bag I have sitting at my feet. She looks at me with a curious distance as I hand it to her.

She peeks inside and looks up at me.

“You didn’t have to do this,” she says.

“I wanted to.”

She pulls out a notebook and a package of colored pencils. I had no idea what to buy so I just told the woman at the store that I needed the best stuff they had.

“This is really thoughtful,” she says, her bright blue eyes staring up at me in pure gratitude. “You know exactly how to make me happy.”

“Get your shit,” I say as I stand up, towering over her. “We’re going hiking.”

“THIS IS SO BEAUTIFUL,” SHE SAYS. “THESE VIEWS ARE stunning.”

They certainly are.

A breeze curls through her hair and makes dark tendrils fall around her cheekbones. She's so fucking beautiful that it hurts.

We've been walking for about a mile now. It's nothing but peace for miles around us. There's a chill to the air. The sound of a babbling stream nearby and the rustling of leaves are the soundtrack to Emma's laughter.

Every so often I need to take her hand to guide her over a patch of mud. There were a few moments where I had to carry her over a stream that only had a few branches as foot-holds and I didn't want her to slip.

With me here, she'll never fall. I won't let anything happen to her.

"Should we take a little break?" she says as she looks back at me.

"Yes," I say. "That sounds amazing."

I grab her hips and lift her onto a crevice in one of the boulders. My cock is so hard with the anticipation of claiming her. Of sliding my cock inside her. Of filling her up. Shooting so deep inside her that she becomes a new person.

"This is just fabulous," she says as she pulls out her notebook and looks around. "This is the absolutely perfect fall day." She smiles. "You know, you could do a guided tour and give this experience to tourists." She knocks her shoulder against mine. "I bet you could charge them a ton of money, too. Make 'em pay for the best of the best. Then again, I think you'd do it out of the goodness of your own heart. You've done it for me. You'd do it for anyone, I think."

"No," I rasp as I suck in a sharp breath and look down at her lips. My eyes flicker up to hers. "I don't want to do this for

anyone else. You are the only fucking person I want to do this for.”

Her eyes widen as I wrap my arm around her back.

“I want you to stay with me, and I don’t mean for tonight, or the weekend, or even a week. I never want you to fucking leave. I don’t want to do this with anyone else. If you leave me, I’m done. I’m fucking done. My life will be over. The truth is that my life never even started until I met you. I’m sick over you. I don’t know what the hell is happening, but I want you to be mine. All. Mine.”

“I guess I’ll have to cancel all the guided tours I scheduled with a bunch of other guys this weekend,” she whispers as a little smile pulls at the corners of her lips.

I put my hand over my heart.

“God, Em, please don’t do this to me. I can’t fucking take this. I’m losing control over myself. Other guys? Please tell me you’re fucking with me right now.”

She smiles and grabs my shirt, pulling at me so our lips are just inches apart.

“I am totally fucking with you.”

“Oh thank God.”

I take her face in my hands. This is it. This is where it all starts.

CHAPTER EIGHT

EMMA

HE BRUSHES HIS LIPS AGAINST MINE, AND I TOTALLY UNRAVEL. I'm floating up into the clouds. I'm having an out-of-body experience. I'm over the moon. My body is on fire with the heat of a thousand suns.

“Em,” he whispers against my lips. “Em, Em.”

He kisses me slowly and deeply. Thoroughly. It's making my pussy dance and tingle.

All this time I've been a virgin I've just been saving myself for him. I think destiny is what really brought me out here to these woods. A virgin sacrifice?

Not for much longer. Adrian is it for me. My man. I'm giving him my virginity. And anything else he might want.

I put my hands on his chest and push him away. He's breathing fast, and his brows are twisted like he's in pain. I tuck a few pieces of his dark, wavy hair behind his ears.

“It's like you plucked my fantasy right from my head and laid it all at my feet,” I whisper as I stroke his cheek with the back of my hand. “I don't understand how I got so lucky.”

A rumble shakes through his chest as he puts his lips on mine again. He consumes me. He dominates me. I'm melting. I'm putty in his hands.

“Come here,” he says as he jumps off the rock and grabs my hips to help me down. He takes my hand and pulls me behind a big tree.

Then my back is up against it. He slides one strap off my shoulder and cups my breast with his hand, swallowing it whole. I close my eyes, but I want to see all of this. I moan softly as he pulls my tits out completely, squeezing my nipples as he bites my neck.

“Oh fuck,” I whisper. “Is it possible to have an orgasm just from that?”

“I don’t know,” he rasps as he pulls back and admires my tits. He eyes flash up to mine. “But I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to find out.”

He licks my nipples, long broad strokes around them, then sharper, with the tip of his tongue, flicking and running his teeth against them.

“I’m soaked,” I whisper. “I’ve never been so wet.”

He kisses up my neck and lands on my lips, exciting every damn inch of me.

His hand slides up my thigh, and he presses the tips of his fingers against my clit through my panties.

“Holy fucking shit,” he growls. He pulls my panties aside and screws one finger inside me. “How the fuck are you so tight?”

He pulls his finger out then adds another.

“I’m gonna have to get you really warmed up before I finally get to really claim you,” he says. “You’re too tight. Fuck, I can’t wait to get you home. You’re too perfect. I can’t take it.”

His words are pinched, needy. I grab the back of his neck, and he hitches my leg up, wrapping it around his thick leg and pressing himself against my core. He shifts his hips and grabs my face, our lips tangling and our mouths attacking each other's.

He's so big. He's got a fucking space rocket in there. I feel it rubbing against my clit. The white-hot anticipation is making me slowly go out of my mind. It's just more and more and more without any release. It's divine.

"I cannot wait to be wrapped up in you."

He kneels in front of me and hitches one knee over his shoulder. He's gonna lick my pussy. My heart gets stuck in my throat.

"I'm about to come from just watching you kneel down in front of me."

"Get used to it," he says as he squeezes my ass. "Because I am going to be down on my knees a lot for you."

I hold my breath as he peels my panties to the side, then makes one long, slow lick up my seam, brackets my clit with his fingers, then swirls his tongue around my clit.

I immediately start to come. He keeps gripping my ass, squeezing it as I start to crumble. I feel like I'm gonna fall. My limbs are like jelly. My pussy is fluttering as lightning bolts erupt from my very soul.

I'm panting and moaning. Adrian slides two fingers inside me and curls them up. "Try to be quieter."

"How the hell am I going to do that if you keep doing amazing shit to me?"

"Just try."

He thrusts his fingers in and out and keeps sucking on my clit before he finally realizes that he's wrung every drop of pleasure from me.

There's no one around for miles. This is just total intimacy.

Adrian stands up and wraps me in his arms.

"I have to tell you the real reason I was out here last night," I say.

"Please," he says as he stills.

"Those people I was with..." I shake my head and exhale. "They thought it would be an amazing, fun, funny thing to strap me to a tree and pretend to burn me alive. Ritual sacrifice. Scary goblins and demons and burning witches, etc."

His face gets red, and his jaw ticks.

"Pretend," I emphasize. "Pretend to burn me alive."

He crosses his arms over his chest. "And how did you happen to become involved in this?"

"I was...um...how do I say this to make it sound less stupid?"

"Out with it."

"They needed a virgin. It was a virgin sacrifice. I was the virgin. The only one they could find. It was me. I —"

"Emma. I got it." He squeezes my hips and looks me up and down. "Fucking hell. Let's get you home."

CHAPTER NINE

ADRIAN

I FINALLY GET TO FINISH WHAT WE STARTED.

I throw her down on the bed, and she lands with a bounce. Her hands go to my pants and she yanks me forward. My cock ricochets against my zipper as a growl comes from my throat.

“You’re gonna make me cum in my fucking pants, Em.”

“I definitely would not want to do that,” she whispers, unzipping me and letting my cock bounce free.

“Holy shit,” she whispers as her eyes lock on it. It’s all a sticky fucking mess. I think I dribbled out enough precum to make her pregnant six times over. There’s so much of it. I know it’s potent. I know there are hungry swimmers in there just waiting to shoot out and drench her hot little pussy.

She licks her lips and sits back, propping herself up with her hands.

“You’re fucking torturing me here,” I say, not allowing myself to touch my cock. I want the next person to touch it to be her. I never want to jerk off alone again. I want it to be with her every single time.

“I’ve never even seen a cock before,” she says, inching toward me. There’s a tremble in her voice. “You have to show me exactly what to do.”

I shift my hips as I exhale a sharp breath.

“I want you to do it,” I whisper. “Whatever you do will be perfect. It will be exactly the way I want it. You are incapable of doing anything wrong. You are infallible. You’re just absolutely fucking perfect.”

She inches forward tentatively and takes the base of my massive erection in one hand and lightly brushes her fingertips against my balls with the other.

“Oh fuck,” I groan, linking my fingers behind my head. I feel like the king of the fucking world now that I’m with her.

She puts her mouth on the tip, and my precum paints her lips. She licks them and slides my dick into her mouth, making a few long strokes as her hand follows.

I pull away and grab her hips, throwing her down and ripping her shirt off.

“I was just starting to get into that!” she yelps. She bites her lip. “Give it back. It’s mine.”

“Oh, it is definitely yours, baby,” I say, rubbing it against the apex of her legs. Her lips pop open, and her brows furrow. Her bright shining eyes tick downward like she wants to see what’s happening between her legs.

“And this,” I say, sliding my hand up her inner thigh, stopping when my hand is cupping her wet pussy, “is mine.”

“It’s all yours,” she whispers as her head falls back against the soft pillows.

“If you are on the fence about living with me here, if there is any part of you that is unsure, tell me now,” I growl. “Because once I have this, I am not giving it up. It’s going to be mine, and I will not let you get away from me.”

“I was never on the fence,” she says, sliding her fingers through my hair. She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “Except when I jumped your fence. But about us?” She takes my hand and holds it over her heart. “I haven’t had a single doubt about us. I can’t picture myself anywhere else. Before today, this was the picture of my perfect life. This. Right here. With you.”

“I’m glad you jumped the fence. But as soon as we’re done here in bed...” I say, then stop myself. “No. We are never going to be done here. But if you need a break from this dick, I am going to go out there and build a bigger fence. As high as the trees. You want that?”

“Yes!” she screams, taking my face in her hands and peppering kisses on my lips. “Make this our sanctuary.”

“This place is going to be a fucking fortress. Locked down. Just like you. Always.”

I pull her panties down and rub the tip of my dick against her opening. My eyes roll back in my head when I pick up the scent of her sweet virgin pussy, licking my lips to taste her, plunging my tongue into her mouth.

I tease her a little at first, but she’s already soaked, and I can’t take this anymore.

I tip her chin up as I slide my cock into her. She mewls and gasps as I go deeper, taking my time to slowly stretch her out. It takes restraint for me to not bust through her cherry with a swift thrust. I can feel it deep in there.

“You are going to fit me perfectly,” I say. My eyes have pure lust and love in them. So do hers. “You are going to fit me like a glove.”

She rolls her hips with her lips parted.

“I think I already do.”

“This pussy warmed up enough to take a good deep pounding?”

“Go slow at first,” she says. “Sometimes waiting for the perfect moment is the best part. I can attest to that.”

She bites her lip as I crush my mouth onto hers. We kiss wildly, sensuously, slowly, roughly, slipping in and out of every single way to kiss your soul mate. This is the best moment of my life. I thrust in and out slowly, groping her breasts, pinching and twisting and biting her nipples through her shirt.

“This has to go,” I groan, sliding her shirt off. “I need to see those tits for myself.”

They’re perfect, modest handfuls.

“Are you on anything?” I ask desperately as I slide out of her, teasing her entrance.

“Yes,” she says, thrusting her hips up. “Pill. Why?”

“I would love nothing more than to fuck a baby right into you right now,” I exhale shakily.

“Oh God,” she moans. “I would love that too.”

“In time, baby,” I say. “We have all the time in the world, now.”

I press a searing kiss to her lips and steady my cock at her entrance.

“Are you ready?”

She nods, bites her lip, and closes her eyes as I slide into her, busting through her cherry and feeling my cock claim the

deepest part of her. The part that no one else is ever going to have. Ever.

“You’re mine,” I whisper against her lips. “You are all mine.”

I pick up speed now as she grabs my back and moans loudly, rocking her hips to get me deeper and deeper.

“I’m about to bust,” I rasp, my hips moving up and down, fucking her hard and slowly.

“Come in me,” she moans. “God, I need to feel you. All of you.”

“This is it babe,” I whisper, my thick cock pounding in and out of her with a frenzy I’ve never seen inside myself before.

This is the way you fuck your soul mate. This is the way you fuck the person you love. This is the way you fuck the person you’re going to fuck for the rest of your life.

“Oh God, fuck, Adrian, I’m coming!”

I groan into her neck and grab her hair as my cock bursts, unleashing rope after rope of hot seed inside her.

“Milk my cock,” I rasp as she moans, high-pitched, heavenly, pure moans that only I will ever hear. “Take every single last fucking drop.”

“Oh Adrian,” she whispers against my lips as she breathes heavily.

“I am never, ever letting you go,” I rasp.

And the party isn’t over yet.

CHAPTER TEN

IT'S ME VERSUS THE HOT-GLUE GUN.

I'm not sure who's winning.

"Ouch," I wince, pulling my hand back from the metal tip that's more like a medieval torture device than a crafting tool.

I look through the glass doors into the house, smiling and brimming with anticipation.

Turns out this place isn't so scary after all. It's at the end of a dead-end street and set back from the main road, but we have actual neighbors. Neighbors with kids. A whole neighborhood of kids, in fact.

"This is the life," I say, stretching my legs out in front of me.

I'm sitting on the back porch with a pile of leaves and twigs spread out around me.

The former owners of this house were crafters. Imagine that. The shed that Adrian almost ripped the door off to get that axe is an absolute treasure trove of ribbons and buttons. There was nothing glittery or glamorous, but I love what I found.

I didn't know buttons could be so cute. Now I know what "cute as a button" really means.

“Okay, and now for the eyes,” I whisper, dotting glue on a little black button and affixing it to a bigger, orange one. “One point for me.”

I dot some glue on the other small black button and position it over the orange button.

“Here we go, one little button pumpkin coming right up,” I whisper as I carefully place it. Some of the glue squeezes through a buttonhole and nips my finger.

One point for the glue gun.

I shake my head and put the glue gun aside.

“The crafting can take a break,” I say as I take a sip of my coffee.

Coffee and crafting. Does it get better than this?

I only need one more thing.

Adrian went out about an hour ago to get candy for the trick-or-treaters, and I’m sitting here in sweet anticipation waiting for him to return.

I peek through the glass door one last time as I sense some movement from inside.

My heart skips a beat as I see Adrian walk through the front door with a million bags hanging on his arms.

I scramble to my feet and throw the glass door open, making my way through the house with a little bit of a saunter.

“Hello, Daddy,” I say as I rise to my toes to greet Adrian with a kiss on the cheek. “Did you get treats that the kids are gonna love?”

He drops the bags growls as he steps toward me. He grabs my wrists and pushes me up against the door. I’m gonna need

more panties if he keeps doing this.

“I went out,” he whispers against my lips between soft, sweet kisses, “and got the biggest bag of candy I could find.”

“Only one bag of candy in those shopping bags?” I say as my lips curl into a smile.

“You didn’t let me finish.” He pulls back and slides his hands up and down my body. “I got the biggest bag of candy I could find, and then I bought five of them.”

He reaches down and grabs a bag without even looking at it.

“This is for you,” he says. “Is this what you wanted?”

“Oh, yeah,” I say as I peek in the bag. Chocolate mix. Sugary mix. Salty mix. He covered all the bases. This guy really does love kids. “You nailed it. This is exactly what I wanted.”

“Now give me what I want,” he says with that insanely handsome smile.

“I think that can be arranged,” I say as I slide one strap down my shoulder and peek down at it. He makes me feel so sexy. “Is this what you were looking for?”

“That’s a start,” he says and goes in for a kiss.

There are laughs and shrieks coming from outside as the trick-or-treaters stream up and down the block.

“I’m sorry to do this to you...to us, actually...but I really need to get everything set up.” I grab the bag of candy. “This cannot be eaten by only two people.”

“I think we could get through all of this,” he says. “No problem.”

He sets me loose.

I smile and grab the rest of the bags.

“And I would gain 100 pounds.”

“And I wouldn’t care at all.”

My heart gets lodged in my throat. A little tear stings the corner of my eye. He stands there at the door, arms over his chest, eyes peering down at me in an intensely protective but delectably seductive way. I think I’m in love.

“Get your lab coat on,” I say as I swat at his butt. We’ve already discussed it, and he’s dressing up as a doctor. Not really a costume, but still. “And then get down here so we can make some kids happy.”

“That reminds me,” he says. “I got you a costume. One that will look perfect next to mine.”

“Adrian,” I say as my heart flips and I dig into the bag. “Don’t tell me you got a sexy nurse costume for me.”

“Guilty,” he says.

“And is this thing gonna have latex thigh-highs or something?”

“Let’s just say you’re gonna be the hottest fucking woman on the block.”

I laugh when I see it and pull it out.

“A doctor costume. For men. Adrian, I’m gonna be swimming in this thing.”

“I’m aware.”

“I love it.”

I run over and give him a kiss.

“Go,” I say as I tear open the bag. He heads off, and I get my costume out. What a cute pair we’re gonna be.

The doorbell rings and excited energy bolts through me.

“Hold on!” I yell as I grab a candy bag. I swing the door open as I dig through them to see what I’ve got on tap for the kids. “Are you guys cool with chocolate or do you want candy corn or—”

I look up as I hear my name.

“Emma!”

“Hi, Katie.”

I roll my eyes.

“What the hell are you still doing here?” she whisper-shouts as she grabs my arm. “Did you ever come back to the dorm last night? Are you being held captive? Blink once for yes, twice for no.”

“What do you mean, did I come back to the dorm last night?”

“I mean”—she looks over her shoulder at a couple of other people who abandoned me. I wave and give them a sarcastic smile—“Did you ever come home last night?”

“No,” I say. “Weren’t you there?”

“Well, no,” she says with a giggle. “I never made it home last night either.”

Her eyes go wide.

“Holy shit!” she yells as she grabs my shoulders. “The virgin is a slut!”

A few moms walking down the sidewalk whip their heads around and cover their kids’ ears.

“Come on,” she says as she grabs my hand, trying to pull me out of the house, “let’s go. You have to tell me everything.”

“No,” I say as I take a step back. “I’m not leaving.”

She looks puzzled.

“But you have to come home some time,” she says, cocking her head to the side.

I feel Adrian come up behind me. Katie’s eyes lift to meet his.

“Emma did come home last night,” he says. “This is her home now.”

Katie takes a step back.

“She is not leaving,” Adrian says as he steps around me.

When he sees some of Katie’s guy friends lingering on the sidewalk, his hands curl into fists at his sides.

“I suggest that you all go home. I never want to see you again. If you spot me out in public, turn around and walk away. You’ll never pull bullshit like this again. To anyone. If you leave now, you can consider it a very generous head-start.”

Katie looks back at the guys and then runs in their direction.

“Oh, and by the way,” I say as Katie looks back at me, “have fun cleaning the microwave.”

Adrian pushes the door closed as Katie starts to say something.

I don’t hear it.

I don’t care.

I'm staying here with my man.

Adrian picks me up and heads toward the stairs.

“But the trick-or-treaters!” I laugh as I try to wiggle out of his grasp.

“They’ll be there later.”

“My crafts!”

“Fuck the crafts,” he says with a possessive rasp. “Fuck all of it. I want to be the only thing you see or touch for the next month.”

He puts a kiss on my lips that makes a flood of happiness fill me.

This Halloween has been perfect.

And I know there are a lifetime more of them to come.

EPILOGUE

ADRIAN — 6 MONTHS LATER

“I LOVE THIS,” EMMA SAYS AS SHE SMILES AT THE TREES AND wipes the back of her hand across her forehead.

We’re about two miles out now. The terrain is getting rockier. The tree roots are knotted and tangled, and there are patches of mud everywhere.

Emma shields her eyes from the sun and points down the path we’re on. There’s a craggy little hill made of a solid piece of rock jutting from the side of the mountain, with a flat part about halfway up, which will be the perfect spot for us to watch the sunset.

“Want to go up there?” she says, jabbing the tip of her walking stick into the soft earth.

“Let’s do it.”

I help her climb, guiding her by her hips up the side of the hill. I know it looks much bigger to her than it does to me. I think she chose it because she knew I’d have to put my hands all over her to help her climb.

I guide her to solid ground and hoist myself up with one small leap.

“Huh,” she says, peeking over the edge of the rock. “You made that look easy.”

“It was easy,” I say as I wrap my arm around her.
“Everything with you is easy.”

We look out at the vast forest below us. At the tops of trees above us. It’s all so amazing.

I look down at Emma.

It’s all so perfect.

“Emma,” I say, taking her hands and turning her toward me.

“Adrian, what is it?”

“I just wanted to tell you how amazing my life is now that I have you in it.”

“You do every single day,” she says, putting her hand on my chest. I put my hand over hers. My heart is beating like crazy.

“You’ve completely changed me, Em. Before you, I thought I wanted to be alone. I thought it was a choice, to never get close to anyone, to throw myself headfirst into my work and just be consumed by this one thing, this one need that just gnawed at me, this calling, vocation, whatever you want to call it. But I now realize that I didn’t want to be alone. It was just a fiction I told myself because it was easier than facing the truth: I went thirty-six years without falling in love. And life means nothing without that. It’s meaningless—”

She cuts me off. “Unless you can share it with someone?” she says with a little smile.

“No. Unless I can share it with you.”

I get down on one knee and pull out the ring box. I never let my eyes leave hers. Not for a second. Not for a millisecond. I need to see all of this play out on her face. I need to

remember everything about this moment. I'm going to memorize it and let it play out in my head over and over and fucking over.

I open the box, and a ray of sunshine shifts past the clouds and pours through the trees. Mother Nature has put a spotlight on her most perfect creation.

Emma's gorgeous pink lips pop open as her eyes sparkle in the sunlight.

"I don't know all the answers, and I can't say what's going to happen in a week or a year or fifty years. But I do know one thing: I want to spend all of my time with you. The rest of this life, I have to have you in it." I exhale a deep breath, realizing that I've been holding my breath for what may have been an eternity. "Emma. Please. Marry me."

Tears roll down her cheeks as she jumps down from the craggy rocks and into my arms. I set her down on solid ground, and she screams, absolutely screams in happiness.

"Stop that," I rasp with a smile, swatting her cute round little ass. "Someone's going to think there's something bad happening out here."

"I would let you fuck me out here if you wanted," she says, her cheeks blushing.

"Emma, you never, ever talk like that," I say as I wrap my arms around her. "At least not where anyone can hear it."

"I want the whole entire world to know that I am going to be Mrs. Adrian Stern."

"Put the ring on before you tell anyone," I say, getting down on one knee again. "I want to keep this to ourselves for one night."

I slide the ring onto her finger, and she holds her hand out, in admiration

“This thing is freaking huge,” she says. “It’s beautiful. It’s just...”

Her voice trails off as she pulls her phone from her back pocket.

“No,” I say, grabbing the phone from her. “We aren’t telling anyone until tomorrow. I want to absolutely go to fucking town on you at least once before anyone else knows.”

“I wasn’t planning to call anyone,” she says with a laugh, snatching the phone back from me. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, then focuses on the screen.

I’m still kneeling. I look down. I’m kneeling in mud. I don’t care, though. I would kneel down in hot molten lava for this woman.

“Adrian...” she says, “look at this.”

She hands me the phone, and the wind gets knocked out of me.

“What does this mean, exactly?”

She shrugs. “It’s an app to track your cycle. And today, it means that if we wanted to try for...” She takes the phone back. “No, it’s way too soon.”

“Too soon for what?” I ask with bated breath.

Whatever it is, I know that it is certainly not too soon. I can’t wait another moment. I want it all with her. I want it all right now. Right fucking now. I wanted it yesterday. I wanted it from the moment life crawled forth from the universe’s primordial ooze and began the slow march of evolution to lead us to where we are today.

I wanted it the second my eyes caught hers. The moment I held her in my arms.

She sucks in a breath and lets it out sharply. “If we wanted to try for a baby tonight, it would be the right time.”

My cock is always in a state of arousal around my now-fiancée, but at those words, I get harder than stone, to the point of near-pain. I’ve never been happier to wear sweatpants than I am right now. I want to grab her in her little leggings and yank them down to slide my cock into her with no stupid fucking buttons or zippers to get in the way.

“I might never let you wear panties around me ever again,” I say as I grab her hand.

I start to race through the woods, dragging her along as she yelps and laughs.

“Slow down!” she yells.

“You’re already slowing me down,” I huff, scooping her up and carrying her the rest of the way home.

When we get inside the house, she drops her backpack and lands with a thud. Her pencils roll away on the hardwood floor, and I lunge for them. I know how important they are to her. I know that she likes to sharpen them a certain way so they glide like butter.

I stuff them back into the bag and then grab my soon-to-be-wife.

My lips are on hers. My thumbs are gliding across her temples, down to her jaw, to her chin. It is intense but slow. I deepen the kiss and lift her up, pressing against her with her back up against the wall.

She's fumbling, trying to get her hands on my cock, trying to slide her hungry fingers down my pants.

"Not here," I rasp, sliding her shirt over her head and throwing it over my shoulder. "I'm bringing you to bed."

I unhook her bra and watch her breasts as it slides down to the floor.

"I don't want to wait until we're upstairs," she says. "I'm good to go. I don't think I can wait. I need it."

A rough growl breaks through me as I set her down, yank her pants off, and slide my dick into her.

"Fuck," she whispers into the crook of my neck as her nails dig into my back.

"You feel so tight and so fucking wet," I groan. I rock my hips and move inside her. "I'm gonna shoot a fucking monster load of cum into you, and I'm not taking my dick out until tomorrow."

She gasps and grabs my face to kiss me. "More," she says. "Tell me more."

"Emma," I groan. "Fuck, Emma, I love you so much. We're more than perfect together. And I am not pulling out until every inch of your hot pussy is drenched in cum. I'm going to keep my dick in there like a plug in a dam to keep anything from dripping out of you. Do you understand that, Em? I'm never pulling out. You're gonna be riding this dick all night."

Her head tilts back, and her eyes screw shut, but I grab her chin to bring her back to me.

"Look at me, Em," I say. "Look at me."

Our sweaty foreheads slide together as I hold her chin so she's looking right into my eyes and I'm looking right into hers.

The door is going to get knocked from its frame with how hard I'm slamming into her.

"I'm gonna play with your little clit now so you'll milk me dry as your pussy comes."

"Oh fuck, oh fuck," she screams. "Do it!"

I give her clit a few hard passes, then her pussy clenches and my dick explodes. My God, this is heaven. It's just me, her, and the future. The future, forever. Forever. I repeat it like a prayer.

Hot ropes of semen explode out of me. I steady the tip of my dick as far as I can make it go, but I still have more for her.

"You're so tight, Em. I have to work to keep fucking you. I can barely get a centimeter of my dick out."

"That's making me come even harder," she groans, her brows knitted in the center.

"Drink it up, baby."

I wrap my arms around her and bound upstairs to our bedroom.

"By the time the night is over, there's gonna be thirty babies in you."

"Did you learn nothing in med school?" she says with a laugh.

"Med school can't teach me shit."

I tear my shirt off and pull her lips to mine.

"Let 'em learn a little something from us."

EPILOGUE

“ADRIAN,” I SAY, ROLLING TOWARD HIM AND HOLDING MY pregnant belly, “it’s time.”

His eyes pop open. I don’t think he ever really fell asleep.

I’ve been checking the time every two minutes, like I’m waiting at the airport for someone I haven’t seen in a very long time. The wait has been excruciating, but the anticipation feels so good.

Life with Adrian is everything I’ve ever wanted and more. I can’t believe we found each other. I should write a thank-you note to my awful ex-roommate. If she hadn’t had me tied to that stupid tree, Adrian would never have rescued me.

He dotes on me and spoils me like crazy. It’s always flowers when he walks through the door and surprise road trips. I wake up every morning excited to hike the trails, catalog the birds I see, and then come home to make dinner for us, waiting in sweet anticipation to see him.

None of the initial romance and spark has dwindled. In fact, it just grows every day. I shake my head and smile as I rub my huge belly. How did I get so lucky?

“I can’t wait to meet you, little guy,” I whisper as a few tears run down my cheeks.

“Who are you talking to?” Adrian says as he bolts off the bed, stripping down to nothing. I bite the corner of my lip as I watch his cock bounce free from his boxers. Oh, how I love that thing and every inch of the man who owns it.

It’s love. It’s pleasure. It’s a baby-maker. I suck in a slow breath as he looks over at me and winks. He’s still the freaking hottest and most protective man I’ve ever met.

“I was talking to our son,” I say, rubbing my stomach.

Oh, shit. The sex of the baby was supposed to be a surprise for Adrian. He didn’t even know that I knew.

I see his jaw tick as he looks at me.

“It’s a boy?”

“It’s a boy,” I whisper.

Adrian runs to me and takes my face in his hands, putting an adoring, slow kiss on my lips.

He pulls away. He’s never looked happier.

“I know you’re excited to have at least one of both,” he says in a low rasp as a smile stretches across his agonizingly handsome face. “We’ll have to start trying for a girl as soon as we can.”

He lifts me into his arms and doesn’t let go until he’s putting me in the car. There’s already a bag in here that he prepped with all of the stuff I’ll need. He is a planner. A meticulous planner.

“Here we go,” he says as we finally drive up to the entrance to the hospital. His friend who works here comes out with a wheelchair. Adrian helps me waddle over to it and his friend starts to grab the handles to wheel me inside, but instead

Adrian pushes him out of the way and tosses him his keys over his shoulder.

“Park it,” he yells without looking back. I peek over my shoulder as he wheels me in and laugh when I see his friend standing there looking confused with the keys in his hand.

“Dude, I’m supposed to be going on my break in five minutes!” he says.

I hold my belly as Adrian speeds us to our birthing suite.

My heart is fluttering in my chest. I even think I can feel my baby’s heart flutter, too. That’s how excited and connected to him I feel right now.

I reach up and grab Adrian’s hand. He squeezes it as we enter the room where our family is really going to start.

Joy fills every part of me, right down to my damn soul.

Oh, how I love this man.

EPILOGUE

ADRIAN — FIVE YEARS LATER

“WE HAVE ONE MORE HOUSE TO VISIT,” I SAY AS I LEAD MY two wonderful kids to the last house on our street.

It’s the perfect Halloween. My kids are dressed up as a pumpkin and a skeleton. Among all of the costumes at the costume store, they picked the most classic ones. The other kids were clawing and fighting for action hero costumes, but Adrian Jr. and Emily went for the old-school stuff.

Emma taught them early and taught them well.

The air is crisp, and I can smell spices coming from the house. Whatever’s cooking in there smells really, really good.

But not as good as the real treat waiting for me.

“But this is our house,” Emily says as she turns to me with wide eyes. “We’re trick-or-treating here?”

“That’s right,” I say, grabbing her and Adrian’s hands. “I wanted to save the best for last.”

They break away from me and run toward Emma as she opens the front door.

My God. This woman is so fucking gorgeous. She takes my breath away.

Her hair is swept up into a bun on the top of her head with wavy tendrils falling around her temples. Her makeup is minimal, and her big, blue eyes are sparkling as she looks down at our kids with pride and adoration.

She's wearing an all-back sleeveless jumpsuit that looks like it's painted onto her body. She's wearing a black apron and a black cape to cover herself up now, but after we put the kids to bed, I'm ripping everything off of her.

The kids wrap their arms around her as they scream and laugh. I stand at the sidewalk and watch, admiring how my wife shows so much love to our kids.

"Slow down, slow down!" she says in her beautiful, airy voice. "When you're trick-or-treating, what are you supposed to say when someone opens their door for you?"

"Trick or treat!" the kids say as they hold out their orange buckets.

Emma grabs two candy bars from a table just inside the door.

"Hm," she says thoughtfully, eyeing our kids with a little smile playing on her lips. Her gaze shifts between them. "I happen to have my last two treats right here."

She drops them in the buckets, and the kids wrap their arms around her. She lets out a little oomph as her gaze travels to mine and she wraps her arms around the kids.

"Now go inside and put your PJs on. I have to talk to your father."

Then run inside, their footsteps pattering up the stairs as Emma rests her raised elbow against the doorframe.

“Did any hot dads come by with their kids?” I say from the sidewalk. I cross my arms over my chest.

“Not that I noticed,” she says, brushing a loose piece of hair over her shoulder. That sweet and airy voice is now turning seductive.

I pace toward her, and the world disappears. It’s all about her.

“Trick or treat,” I say, rubbing my hands together. I pick her up and spin her around.

“I’ve heard those words all evening,” she says as she bites her lip. “They’re starting to lose meaning. Trick. Treat. Trick. Treat. It’s all starting to sound the same to me.”

“Then let me say it a little slower.”

My hand slides to the front of her neck, and I untie her cape, making it fall to the ground. It makes a cascading sound as it lands on the leaf-blanketed paving stones.

“Oops,” she says, her eyes dreamy.

“Trick or treat?” I repeat, slower this time as I grab her chin. She tilts her head back and presses the tip of her tongue to the corner of her lips.

“Say it again, babe,” she whispers.

A huge, pure, fucking happier-than-happy smile spreads across her lips.

“Trick,” I say, squeezing her ass, “or treat?”

“What are you going to do if I don’t give you a treat?” she says. “Cover my house with shaving cream? Decorate the front lawn with toilet paper?”

“No, I’m going to tease you until you’re going out of your mind to give me the treat I earned.”

“Well,” she says, smoothing out the collar on my shirt and playing with the buttons, “you heard me tell the two most precious kids on the block that they got my last two treats.”

I exhale sharply as a rumble vibrates through me. My wife wiggles her ass a little, and my cock gets hard between us. She lets out a little gasp as I pull her closer.

“Dr. Stern,” she gasps.

“I think you have a treat somewhere for me,” I rasp as I kiss her neck. “Just one more for your husband.”

“I think you have one for me too,” she whispers against my lips. “I can feel it.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Oh yeah,” she whispers. “It’s big and hard, and I don’t know if I’m going to be able to fit it in my mouth.”

My cock jerks and a spurt of precum dribbles out of it. I can feel it working its way down my cock as Emma wraps her arms around my neck.

We devour each other. I put my lips against hers, and our tongues tangle slowly. I hold her close and feel every inch of her sweet, sexy little body. She is mighty, but she’s small enough to be putty in my hands. I imagine pulling her inside the house, calling a grandparent or two to come get the kids, and spend the night with my hot little wife’s pussy wrapped around my cock like a goddamn bow.

The way it’s supposed to be every single day of the year.

We break away, and she shivers.

The cool late-evening air is making goosebumps plump on her shoulders. I rub my hands up and down her arms to keep her warm, but this isn't cutting it.

“Want me to go chop down a tree for firewood?” I say.

“No,” she says. “I want you to come inside and cuddle on the couch. You've chopped down enough trees already. We have plenty of firewood. Enough to last a lifetime.”

“That's exactly what we need. A lifetime's worth.” I look my wife up and down. I know she's as crazy for me as I am for her. I see my future in her eyes. I see her body in our bed and her heart in my hands.

Her heart is the most important thing I've ever cared for. And I'll do it until I breathe my last breath.

If cryogenics gets perfected in my lifetime, I'm having myself frozen until they figure out how to bring people back from a frozen state. I want to spend ten billion lifetimes with this woman and our two kids.

“But what if we ever start to run low?” she says. “We're gonna be starting a whole lot of fires over the years.”

“Just tell me when we're running low, and I'll take care of it.”

“Can I watch?” she says and slides her hands up my stomach. Her fingers feel like heaven. Her lips are so sweet. It's almost too much happiness to bear.

“Absolutely,” I say as I squeeze her ass. “I want you watching me from the hot tub while I do it.”

“Adrian,” she says, taking a step back. Her lips are parted, and her eyes are wide with excitement as a breeze tangles through her hair. “I have a surprise treat for you.”

She takes my hand and puts it on her stomach.

“Surprise,” she says with a twinkle in her eye.

“Oh my God,” I rasp and cup her face with my hands. “I’m so fucking happy.”

“Me too,” she says, wiping away a few tears. I brush my thumbs over them before they can roll down her cheeks and then press my starving lips to hers.

My heart is going to explode.

I pick her up and spin her around. I never want to let go.

This woman is mine until the end.

THE END

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Keep reading for a little preview of “Private Property” or [view my catalog on Amazon](#).



PRIVATE PROPERTY

PREVIEW

“ARE YOU SURE IT’S COOL FOR ME TO BE HERE?”

Daniella slides her car into the driveway and cuts the engine.

“Of course,” she says. “It’s called an *open* house for a reason, right? Besides, this is my dad’s listing, and I know for sure that you two are going to totally hit it off.”

Daniella and I step out of the car as pure exhilaration fills me. The house laid out before us looks like it’s torn right from the pages of a magazine.

It’s two stories, tucked into the craggy hillside at the end of a quiet, dead-end street. The branches of desert willow trees surrounding it reach up from their twisted, knotted trunks and burst with a tangle of green leaves and vibrant pink flowers.

There are mountains in the distance, and the late-afternoon sun is casting a warm glow over every inch of the landscape.

“Your dad really did all of this?” I say.

“Yep, that’s right. Designed it, was here when they broke ground, decided on what appliances should be installed. Every single tiny detail of this house, every doorknob, every light fixture, every drop of paint, everything in here has his DNA written all over it.”

“I can’t wait to meet him.”

She goes to the back of the car and grabs a case of champagne from the trunk.

“Let me help you,” I say.

“It’s a one-person job.” She points her chin at her purse hanging from her shoulder. “You can grab the key for me.”

I dig around in her purse for a moment before pulling it out. I hold it in my palm and wrap my fingers around it gently as though it’s a good luck charm.

“Come on,” Daniella says with a smile. “Wait until you see the inside.”

My heart is pounding in my chest as our heels click on the wide path.

“We’re the first ones here,” she says as I unlock and push the door open.

I gasp as we step inside.

“Daniella. I’ve died and gone to real estate heaven.”

It’s pure beauty. A double-story foyer. High ceilings and a landing on the second floor that overlooks the main part of the house. Dark hardwood floors. All rich brown and beige tones. It’s masculine but graceful. My eyes light up with every new thing they land on.

There’s a fireplace on the left that’s seamlessly integrated into the flow of the room, with tall bookshelves built into the wall on either of side. It’s flanked by a contemporary, chic black sofa and two armchairs. The sofa looks like you’d sink right down into it like a warm bath.

On the right is a kitchen that would rival the world's best restaurants. Two ovens, an enormous gas range, dark marble countertops. There's a massive dining table beyond it with an arrangement of fresh white roses and eight chairs around it. Daniella heads for the kitchen and grabs an ice bucket from a cabinet.

I look up. I'm standing under a chandelier that looks like a piece of modern art.

I feel like a New York tourist who won't stop craning their neck to get a look at the skyscrapers, bumping into the locals and taking up too much room on the sidewalk. They always annoyed me, but now I know how they feel.

I take a deep breath of the house's glorious scent. It smells like leather, fresh laundry, and a hint of lemon. It's subtle, but it's there.

"This is the best part," Daniella says as she grabs my hand and ushers me to the far wall. She slides a slatted panel aside to reveal a full wall of windows framing the panoramic view of the glimmering pool and the desert and mountains beyond it.

"Would you look at that?" I say as I step closer to the window. "The best part of the house isn't even inside the house."

"You love it, right?" Daniella says as she clasps her hands together.

"It's just amazing," I say. "I'm speechless."

I sink down into a dining chair as Daniella grabs some water bottles from the fridge and arranges them on the kitchen island with a couple bottles of champagne.

I sigh contentedly and look out at the stunning landscape.

I'm from New York, but I've always been fascinated by the desert. New York is just never-ending gray buildings and a tangle of cold subway lines.

The desert is vast and open. It's peaceful here. It's a kind of peace I've never felt before.

My mom convinced me to come out here for college. I always thought I'd go to a local college and live in Brooklyn for the rest of my life, but she wanted me to think bigger. I applied to a bunch of schools all over the country, and this one gave me a full-ride scholarship which includes on-campus housing. My first real estate transaction!

Daniella and I met a few weeks ago at freshman orientation, and she's taken me under her wing. She asked me out to lunch a few days later and told me to meet her at the real estate brokerage her father owns.

When I got there, I was awe-struck by the house listings hanging in the window. Each house was more beautiful than the last.

I was deep into a fantasy about waking up in one of them some day when a snooty woman stood up from her desk and gave me the evil eye. She sauntered over and opened the door a crack like she was afraid of letting any of the air-conditioned, rarified air blow my way.

“Are you here to inquire about a house?” she asked.

She tapped her pointed-toe stiletto heel at me while inspecting her nails.

“Um.” I took a step backward. “I'm just...window shopping?”

She made a big show of rolling her eyes and crossing her arms over her chest.

“I didn’t think you looked like the purchasing type.”

“I’m nineteen,” I said. “How would any nineteen-year-old be the purchasing type for houses like these?”

She opened her lips as Daniella spotted me from inside. She squeezed past the snobby lady and grabbed me.

“What’s up with her?” I whispered as I shot a look over my shoulder.

“I don’t know,” she said. “She just started last month. I think she’s mad because her Maserati is the wrong shade of neon yellow.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Daniella come over with two glasses of champagne.

“Oh,” I say as she slips one into my hand. “I don’t really drink.”

“Don’t worry,” she says with a wink, “this is just sparkling cider. I always sneak in a bottle with the champagne.”

“I will drink to that,” I say as we clink our glasses together.

“Come on,” she says. “Let me show you the rest of the house.”

Daniella takes me on the grand tour of the second story. It’s more of the same wonderful things the first floor boasted—panoramic views and hard-wood floors, small embellishments, personal touches. Gorgeous wall-scones and subtle carvings on the doors. Big, fluffy area rugs. It’s Manhattan-skyscraper-chic combined with a touch of the airy lightness of Southern California.

We walk through the biggest bedroom, gorgeously staged, and when we get to the main en-suite bathroom, I make a beeline directly to the shower.

I look at Daniella with hopeful eyes.

“May I?”

“Get in,” Daniella says as she crosses her arms and leans against the door frame.

I put my glass on the counter and step inside.

“This is pure, absolute bliss. Picture me taking an actual shower,” I say as I run my fingers through my ponytail, “under this fancy shower-head.”

She laughs.

“We just met. I think it’s a little early in our friendship for us to imagine seeing each other naked.”

I smile and step out of the shower as the sound of chatter floats up from downstairs.

“More people are arriving, so I have to go say hello,” she says. “But you stay here, look around, go downstairs, do whatever you want. Make yourself totally at home.”

I smile as she leaves, taking a minute to let that word flow through me: *home*.

I walk back to the second-floor landing.

The view looks good from up here.

I’m surveying the house when a flicker of movement in the foyer catches my attention.

Even though I haven’t met him yet, I know this man is Daniella’s dad.

There are more people filing into the house behind him, and as they step inside, there are more and more eyes totally fixed on him. Everyone is acting like they’re lucky to be here,

as though this is Caleb's world and we're all just rotating around him like planets being pulled into his orbit.

He doesn't seem like some of the rich asshole bosses my mom has had over the years. My mom's last boss threw an absolute screaming fit when she asked if she could leave early to attend one of my parent-teacher conferences. Absolutely disgusting.

His picture on the website was gorgeous, but there is something else about him that triggers my curiosity.

His crisp white shirt shows off his broad chest and shoulders. The sleeves are rolled up to the elbows to show trails of tattoos up and down his muscles. They look faded and subtle from here. Maybe he got them a long time ago. They hint at a rebellious youthfulness that triggers my curiosity even more.

His eyes scan the house with an air of authority and quiet confidence. The slight smile on his face shows pride and accomplishment, but there isn't a shred of arrogance or superiority about him.

His eyes flitter over to mine, and I feel my breath catch in my throat. He quickly looks away as my lips drop open. A hot flush rolls through me as I watch someone bring a drink to him. He takes a sip and then looks up at me again.

A warm, tingling feeling flows through every single pore on my body. I feel like I'm being bathed in bright, golden sunlight.

The rest of the party seems to blur into the background, just a vague imitation of what was once there. It all just becomes fuzzy and melts away.

A man comes up to Caleb and shakes his hand. Caleb's eyes leave mine, but the feeling still remains.

I feel as though I'm totally tuned in and hyper-aware of everything around me. It's like a filter has been removed, and he's invited me into his world, into his orbit, into his exclusive sphere of influence.

I feel...special. Acknowledged.

He runs a hand through his dark, wavy hair. The hint of silver at his temples threads lower to pepper his closely cropped beard. It's just a little bit more growth than a five o'clock shadow.

This is the beard of a man who hasn't been at home and hasn't had the chance to shave in the past few days.

I wonder where he's been?

He's gorgeous and successful, but so are a lot of the other guys here tonight.

But...there's something about him in particular that makes my heart flutter. I feel myself getting wet imagining how he would handle a woman. How he would handle me...

Grab it on Amazon!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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