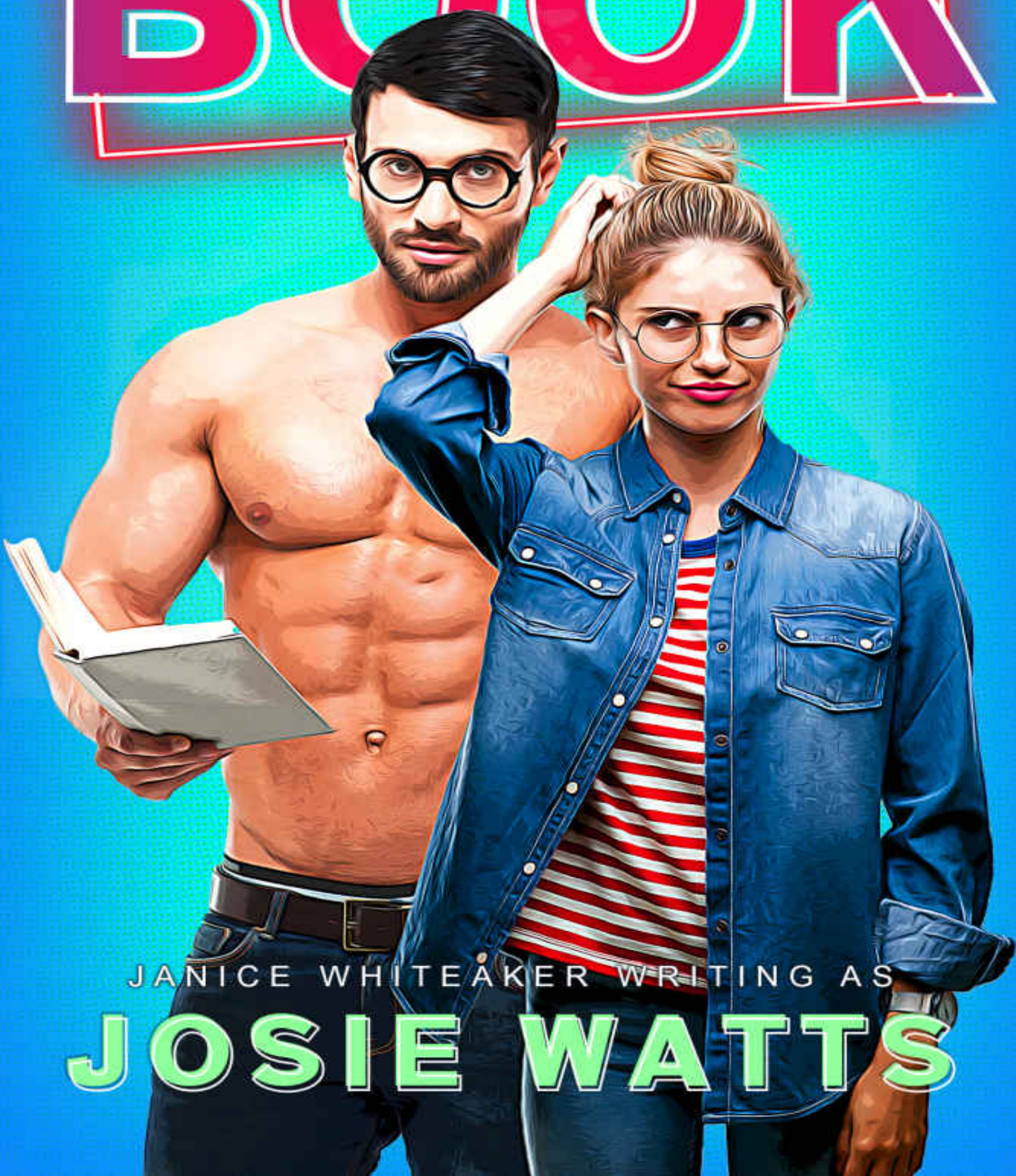


by the **BOOK**



JANICE WHITEAKER WRITING AS

JOSIE WATTS

by The
BOOK

JANICE WHITEAKER WRITING AS
JOSIE WATTS

By the Book, Book 4 of the Scandals in Sweet Side series.

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CHAPTER ONE

JILLIAN

“YOU GOT ANYTHING new under there, Jillian?” Sylvia slaps a pile of books onto the counter before leaning against it, peering at me over the top of her glasses. “I need a gift.”

I grab the stack of relatively tame romance novels she’s selected and slide them closer to my side of the checkout station. “Who’s it for?”

Normally I would humor her. Let her look through all the high-end products I keep out of sight. But first I need some clarification. It’s recently come to my attention that Sylvia doesn’t mind dropping a couple hundred dollars to embarrass the shit out of someone that’s pissed her off, and I don’t necessarily want my store’s reputation dragged into her drama.

Especially after the bridge club butt plug incident.

“My grandson and his fiancée.” She leans a little closer, lowering her voice like we aren’t the only people currently occupying Spicy Stacks, the store I’ve owned since moving to Sweet Side, Florida nearly five years ago. “I want to give them something they’ll get a lot of use out of, if you know what I mean.”

I absolutely know what she means, I’m just not so sure buying her grandson and future granddaughter-in-law a vibrator is a great idea, no matter how fancy it is. Especially if she’s planning to wrap it up and set it on the gift table next to toasters and wine glasses.

“I understand the sentiment and appreciate that you are being open-minded and sexually progressive, but I’m not sure

how many people would be super excited to use something during frisky times that reminds them of their grandmother.” I try to phrase it as delicately as I can. Enjoying sex is difficult enough for women as it is. The last thing any of us needs is intrusive thoughts about little old ladies derailing the O-train before it makes it safely to the station.

Sylvia purses her lips, slouching down a little. “I didn’t think of that.” Her eyes suddenly widen and snap to meet mine. “I just won’t put who it’s from on the label.” She smiles wide, straightening off the counter. “Problem solved.”

As much as I hate the thought of a woman missing out on something so important to her sexual health, I still don’t think Sylvia’s gift idea is as perfect as she thinks it is. “I’m not sure an anonymous vibrator is any better of a solution.”

Not that I plan to ever have a wedding of my own, but if I did, receiving a random vibrator as a gift would be a little unnerving. Even for me.

And I sell vibrators for a living.

“Psshht.” Sylvia waves one hand at me, dismissing my concerns. “It will be fine.” She drops her elbows to the counter, leaning against it once again. “Show me what you’ve got.”

I’m still not completely on board with her plan, but a sale is a sale at this point. And she’s not going to give in until she gets what she wants anyway.

Unless she wants another butt plug. She’s cut off from those.

“I just got this yesterday.” I pull out one of the latest and greatest models I carry, setting the glamorous looking box on the counter between us. “It’s got twenty settings and Bluetooth capabilities.” I stand the box on one end and gesture along the transparent sleeve at the sleek lines of the device inside. “It’s waterproof and rechargeable, so it can be ready whenever she is.”

Sylvia’s penciled-in brows lift. “No batteries?” She snags the box away from me and flips it over, reading through the

text on the back. “What in the hell does it need twenty different settings for?”

I smile, unable to stifle the eagerness that her question creates inside me. There’s nothing I love more than an opportunity to educate women about their bodies. About their needs. About their sexuality. Unfortunately, that opportunity comes up way too often.

It wasn’t that long ago that women were told to lie back and think of England while their husbands satisfied their own carnal urges, accepting that the encounter had nothing to offer them. And, unfortunately, we haven’t come as far as a lot of people think. No one’s telling men to take one for the team when their wife needs to get her rocks off. Until that happens, I won’t feel like the playing field has been leveled.

Hell, we’re still at a point where no one even wants to admit that sometimes a girl just needs to get off.

I go into teacher mode, offering Sylvia an explanation she should have gotten decades ago. “Women’s bodies are all very different and respond uniquely to stimulation.” I point out the descriptions of the different settings. “Some prefer soft and fast movement while others prefer a firmer, slower touch.”

Sylvia shoots me a grin. “There’s a saying about that, you know. Different strokes for different folks.” She pushes the box my way. “I’ll take it.” She slaps one hand onto the top of the books she collected earlier. “And these.”

“Awesome.” I go to work ringing her up, scanning all the barcodes before loading the items into a paper shopping bag stamped with my slightly NSFW logo. Once everything’s packed in, I lift up a bottle of toy cleanser. “Would you like some of this too?”

Sylvia squints at the label affixed to the front. “What’s that for?”

“It’s a special antibacterial cleanser that won’t degrade the materials of the device.” I move it closer so she can see it better. “It’s also hypoallergenic so it shouldn’t irritate her skin.”

Sylvia flicks one hand in the direction of the bag. “Sure. Don’t want dildo degradation.”

I fight the urge to correct her. To point out that it’s a vibrator and not a dildo. But Rome wasn’t built in a day, so I scan the bottle and drop it in, reading off the total as Sylvia pulls out her wallet.

The bell on the door of my hodgepodge of a business rings as I swipe Sylvia’s card and I glance up, expecting to see Elana coming in for her afternoon shift.

Instead I’m faced with the stupidly attractive owner of the gym next door. Noah Hicks—gym bro and fuck boy extraordinaire—saunters into my space, his long steps unhurried as he moves around the edges of my small shop, eyes dragging over everything from the ceiling to the floor.

I grit my teeth, doing my best not to show my irritation at the invasion. He doesn’t belong here any more than I belong in his domain. The chances of me spending an afternoon on a treadmill are just as likely as him being literate.

Maybe that’s not completely fair of me. He clearly knows how to read the back of a protein powder canister.

Noah meanders his way through the shelves, feigning interest in the paperbacks that sell like hotcakes to the local lady retirees looking to relive the youth they didn’t get to claim the way they wanted the first time around. The women of Sweet Side have shown up for me in a big way, spending a surprising amount of their disposable income in my little corner of the world. They love it and I love them.

Men don’t seem to have the same sentiment.

They don’t understand this place. They don’t recognize the need for a judgment-free space where women can browse books written for them and purchase items made for them. Men do come here occasionally, usually dragged by a woman hoping the experience might offer enlightenment.

But Noah’s presence is different. Having him here feels like an intrusion.

He's not the kind of man that would be interested in learning how to be better in bed. I can tell by the arrogant air surrounding him that Noah's about as full of himself as they come. The kind of man who believes all he has to do is show up, get his dick out, stuff it in a hole and pound away, because a woman should orgasm simply from being in the presence of his washboard abs and bulging biceps.

Unfortunately, Sylvia clearly didn't have a mother like mine so she doesn't seem to notice the same red flags I do.

She turns to face him, resting one arm on the counter as she looks Noah up and down, taking in his muscled body and tanned skin. "Well, well, well. Who do we have here?"

Noah flashes her an easy smile that has probably dropped countless pairs of panties. "I didn't realize Julian catered to such an attractive clientele."

I close my eyes, breathing deep as I fight the urge to grab the closest thing and send it sailing right at his depressingly attractive face. I've crossed Noah's path a handful of times since his business moved into the same aging strip mall as Spicy Stacks six months ago, and he's gotten my name wrong every single one of them. At first I tried correcting him, but then it became clear he simply didn't care enough to get it right. Yet another of the red flags following the man like a funeral procession. One commemorating the death of female pleasure.

Because if Noah can't even be bothered to remember my name, then he sure as hell wouldn't waste time on something as pointless as the clit. One more reason I know he's the kind of man that sends women flocking to my store in search of satisfaction. Technically I should be thanking him since his existence pays my bills, but I'm not sure I'll ever be able to make myself feel grateful for the sexual suffering of womankind.

"Well, now you know." Sylvia stands a little straighter, fluffing out the curls of her cropped hair with one hand as Noah comes to stand at the register, his dark eyes fixed on her as he offers his palm.

“Noah Hicks. I work next door.”

Sylvia slides her hand into his. “Sylvia DeMario.” She turns to me with a sly smile. “You’ve been holding out on me, haven’t you?”

I definitely have not been holding out on her. Sure, Noah’s pretty to look at, but that’s where his appeal ends. In the handful of times he’s acknowledged my existence, not only has he called me Julian each and every one, but he immediately follows it up by talking only about himself.

Almost like he thinks I care.

“That doesn’t sound like Julian.” Noah continues, blasting Sylvia with his super whitened, thousand-watt smile. “She would never keep something important from her friends.”

He’s not wrong there. I love educating women. Empowering them. Helping them become comfortable with their own needs and bodies. And I’m pretty sure Noah Hicks has nothing to offer the female population unless we want to know how a bro split works.

“She’s an angel, isn’t she?” Sylvia snags her bag from the counter with her free hand and turns to face Noah. “I bet you just love working next to her.” She bats her eyes at him. “Getting to see that pretty face every morning.”

I glare at the side of her head, hoping she can feel the daggers I’m sending her way and shuts the hell up. I know what she’s doing, and I’m not here for it. Noah isn’t my type, and I’m sure as hell not his since I’m positive his type must not enjoy being sexually satisfied.

Noah’s expression sobers as his eyes lift to meet mine, holding for just a second. “I have to admit, I don’t get to see her smile much.”

I scowl at him because he’s definitely not getting a smile out of me now. Maybe not ever.

Noah’s dark gaze dips to my mouth and I could swear his nostrils flare the tiniest bit. Before I can even unpack that possibility, Sylvia steps in close at his side, pulling that surprisingly intense focus her way.

“Tell me about yourself.” She hooks her bag over one arm and laces the other through Noah’s. “What does a strapping boy like you do for a living?”

Noah blinks, almost like he’s resetting, then his smile comes back, blown out and bright. “I own the gym next door.”

Sylvia tips her head back, expression impressed. “Owner of a gym. That’s just wonderful.” She leans toward him. “You got any interest in helping an old woman put a little more pep in her step?”

“Why?” Noah’s expression softens the tiniest bit. “Is your mother looking for a personal trainer?”

Sylvia’s head falls back and she hoots out a loud laugh. “You are one heck of a charmer, aren’t ya?” She moves toward the door, dragging Noah along with her. “Why don’t you walk me to my car and tell me how I can make an appointment to come let you give me a good workout.”

I could swear the tips of Noah’s ears seem to redden at her blatant flirting, but that can’t be right. It’s got to be an illusion created by the streaks of mid-afternoon sunlight cutting in through the front windows, because Noah is clearly eating up the attention.

Unsurprisingly.

I watch through the front windows as Noah leads Sylvia out to her luxury crossover, taking the heavy bag of books and vibrator and carrying it most of the way.

Maybe the act would soften my heart toward him if he hadn’t been such a dick to me literally every time I’ve seen his face. But after being called Julian more times than I can count, and being forced to listen to him brag about how he’s already had to move his business into a larger facility three times, the chances of me developing any sort of fondness for the guy is slim to none. No matter how many old ladies he helps across the street.

I turn away as he opens her car door, ready to focus on more important things. And pretty much everything is more important to me than Noah Hicks.

I spend the next half hour dusting shelves and restocking my best sellers, filling out the displays in preparation for the upcoming weekend. Now that the weather up north is turning cold, snowbirds and vacationers are filling out the already popular oceanside town I chose to be my home.

And those ladies love reading smut.

I'm just finishing up when Elana comes in, looking frazzled.

"Busy day?" I meet her at the main counter, tucking the fluffy stick duster into place before going to work sorting the mail.

"All days are busy now." She slides her purse into the undercounter cabinet next to the safe before straightening and leaning against the wall with a sigh. "Single motherhood is overrated."

I toss an ad for discount mattresses into the trash can. "I'm pretty sure no one's giving single motherhood high marks."

"It could be zero and it would still be overrated." She takes a deep breath, blowing it back out. "But it's way better than being married was, so I'm going to stop complaining."

I chuck another random flier into the trash can under the counter. "I'm going to say they're both probably overrated."

Elana is a perfect example of why I have no intentions of ever getting married. She spent years putting her heart and soul into a relationship that brought her nothing but misery.

Misery and a kid she now has to take care of herself.

"At least I got Bella out of my marriage." Elana's face lights up the way it always does when she talks about her daughter. "She's worth all the bullshit I went through."

That seems like a stretch to me. I saw what she went through when she left Austin, the asshole who thought violence was a great way to make a woman change her mind. I'm not sure much is worth all that he put her and Bella through.

I rip into the final piece of mail in the stack and pull out the folded paper inside. “I’m just glad he finally calmed the fuck down. I thought for a minute I was going to have to kill hi ___”

My words strangle off as I stare at the letter from my landlord, all my focus zeroing in on the line of words written in bold print across the top.

Notice of non-renewal of lease.

CHAPTER TWO

NOAH

JESSE LIFTS A brow at me as I come through the gym doors. “Didn’t realize you preferred your women a little older.” His face splits into a wide grin. “That explains why you never want to go out with us after work. Your ladies are already home in bed.”

“Very funny.” I plant one hand in the center of his chest, pushing him out of my way as I pass the front desk. “You won’t be laughing when she brings all her rich little friends in for base level workouts.”

Jesse’s one of the newer personal trainers I hired to fill out my staff when we moved into this location. And while I’ve been able to feed him and everyone else a steady supply of new clients, I’m sure he’ll be happy when his schedule is as packed as mine.

As I expect, he’s immediately interested. “Rich friends, you say?”

I nod as I keep walking. “Sounds like she’s got a whole crew of them and they’ve all decided they need to be a little more active.”

I didn’t realize just how big of a change moving to the Gulf Coast of Florida would be when I left Boston behind three years ago and overhauled my life, deciding to focus on what was really important to me. I was excited about the change of scenery and the improvement in weather conditions, but I assumed my work life wouldn’t change all that much.

I was wrong as hell.

Now, instead of spending my days training CEOs and their wives, I spend it with retired CEOs and their second wives.

“Did she make an appointment to come in?” Jesse follows me through the gym, moving past the high-end equipment and experienced trainers that warrant the prices I charge. “I probably need to brush up on my low-impact options before her first session.”

“She and her friends are coming next week, so you have time.” I pause, watching Stefano as he works through his first set with a new client. Stefano is one of my most patient trainers, which is why I set him up with this particular customer. She’s high strung and hasn’t worked out in years, but I think he could probably push her a little harder, so I make a mental note to pass that observation along later.

I turn back to Jesse and catch his ball of the mental juggling that’s always happening in my brain. “See who else has availability next week. We’ll need at least three more trainers to handle the group initially. You can get together and come up with a plan to assess their individual fitness levels and a workout that they can all do with modifications.” I scan the floor, doing a mental inventory of the clients and trainers currently working around me. “We’ll be better off treating them like a class because it sounds like they’ll get distracted if we separate them.”

Sylvia is definitely a character, and it took me all of five seconds to realize she’ll need someone with a strong personality to keep her focused. Someone who takes their job as seriously as I take mine. Someone who won’t get flustered or sidetracked by her constant flirting. Jesse definitely fits that bill, which is why I want him to take charge of this particular endeavor.

“Got it.” Jesse jerks his head in a quick nod before branching off from me and going straight to the break room where anyone not currently on the floor with a client is most likely loitering.

I continue in the opposite direction, taking the most direct route to my small office and closing myself inside.

It's not that I don't like the men and women who work for me. I do. I just don't really know how to talk to them. They've all led very different lives from mine, and the older I get the harder it is for me to hide that fact. No matter how much changes, I'm still that kid sitting alone at lunch, watching everyone from afar with no clue how to close the distance between us.

And unfortunately, that includes Jillian.

I drop down in the chair behind my desk and catch my head in my hands.

Fucking Jillian.

The proverbial girl next door has had my attention from the second I saw her. She's got this sexy, serious, slightly disapproving librarian vibe that feeds into way too many of the teenage fantasies I've carried into adulthood. Unfortunately, in an attempt to avoid coming on too strong, I'm pretty sure I've managed to make her hate my guts. Unless that scowl she always sends my way is just her normal expression.

But even that damn frown gets my dick hard embarrassingly fast. One of many reasons I don't know how to act around her.

Or around any woman for that matter.

I straighten in my seat, sucking in a deep breath that does nothing to ease the old humiliation still digging its claws into my skin. My computer sits on the desk in front of me and I can't stop myself from opening the web browser and pulling up the closest florist.

I should send her flowers. Apologize for being as inept as I am at talking to women under the age of seventy.

I scroll through the options, wavering between coral tulips and yellow sunflowers. Both are bright and sunny and pretty in a way I want to believe will bring a smile to her face.

And I would fucking love to be the one to make Jillian smile.

I have the tulips added to my basket and I'm halfway through checking out when I finally come to my senses. Sending her flowers won't fix anything. It will probably only make things worse.

Then, instead of thinking I'm an asshole, she'll know I'm something so much worse.

A quick series of knocks rap on my door and a second later it opens. Jesse leans against the frame, one hand still on the knob. "How many should we plan for?"

I slam my computer closed and lean back in my chair, rubbing both hands down my face. "She didn't say."

And I didn't ask. I was still too flustered from seeing Jillian. Talking to her. Trying to come up with a way to seem confident and charming without revealing just how interested in her I really am. How much I want to get to know her. Touch her. Smell her. Taste her.

I thought pretending I didn't remember her name was an easy way to accomplish that. It seemed harmless enough at the time, but now I'm second-guessing that assumption.

"Can we call her?" Jesse comes into my office and sits down in the chair stationed on the other side of my desk. "Get a firm number?"

I sit taller, resisting the old urge to slouch in my seat. To shrink down in the presence of a guy who never would have realized I existed if our paths crossed a decade ago. "I'll finalize the number when I call to confirm her appointment."

Thank God I had enough mental fortitude to get Sylvia's number, not that it makes me feel much better about how that whole situation played out.

Jesse gives me a quick nod, stretching his legs out and looking completely relaxed. "Works for me." He jerks his chin toward the door he left open. "A few of us are headed over to Sloopy's after work. You want to come?"

Ten years ago I would have been thrilled to be included. Back when there was still time for me to figure out how to be

like them. Time for me to establish the groundwork and experience most men my age stood on.

But it's too late for all that now. Now the best thing I can do is focus on my business. I've worked hard to get where I am. Left behind one career and started another. And as much as I want to believe I'm being invited because they genuinely enjoy spending time with me, I'm rational enough to know that's probably not the case.

Letting the men and women who work for me see just how socially awkward I am won't do anything but embarrass me and make them look at me differently. But I'm the boss, and it pays to be on good terms with the guy who signs your checks, so they would never admit they see me for what I am.

But I would still know.

I stand from my seat. "I would, but I've got plans."

Jesse wiggles his brows at me. "Got a hot date?"

I manage a smile. "Something like that." I load my laptop into my bag, zipping it closed as I see the rest of my crew heading out. "You should probably get going. They look like they're ready to leave you."

Jesse doesn't rush to get up, proving he's yet another thing I've never been—comfortable with his position in the friend-group hierarchy. "You'll have to tell me all about this date on Monday." He stands up from his chair, shooting me a grin. "I'll cross my fingers you don't sleep in your own bed tonight."

I hold my smile, hoping it looks more like I'm playing it cool and less like I know the chances of that happening are slimmer than none. "Be safe."

He gives me a wave before catching up to the rest of the trainers and heading out the door, leaving me alone to close up shop. It's a task I handle myself because, even after three years, it's still surreal to walk around and know this is my life. That I was able to take what saved me and turn it into a business that helps others combat the same issues that brought me to my knees.

I grab my bag and sling it over one shoulder before locking up my office and heading to the front desk. Dropping my bag onto the chair, I go to work turning off the lights, moving around the large space to double check that everything has been put back in place, even though I already know it has. I've got a great team right now, full of trainers who pull their own weight and clean up after themselves and their clients. It's fantastic and something I've worked hard to obtain.

But not having to spend an hour every night wiping down machines and replacing weights has left me with a little more free time on my hands. Free time I don't know how to fill.

I switch off the last of the lights, double-checking the bathrooms to make sure everyone made it out, before heading back toward the check-in counter.

I'm halfway across the gym when the door opens, the digital bell my only warning that someone is coming in since a row of equipment blocks my line of sight.

I hurry my steps, working up to a slow jog, calling out loud enough whoever's here will hear me and know I'm on my way. "Can I help you? We're closed for the night, but I'm happy to—"

My body locks up at the site of Jillian standing inside my gym, arms crossed over her chest, that perpetual frown I find irresistible twisted across her lips.

My mouth immediately goes dry and my heart starts to race, pounding out a rhythm that falls somewhere between panic and excitement. "Jillian."

Her head tips to one side and her frown turns to a scowl. "So now you know my name?"

Shit. I knew that was pissing her off. I should have stopped. Should've apologized.

Should've sent those fucking flowers I wanted to send her.

But I didn't do any of those things because I have no fucking clue how to do this. How to show a woman I like her without sending her running when she discovers my version of *like* is a little more intense than everyone else's. And

unfortunately, now that I'm pushing thirty, all my chances of figuring it out with a learning curve intact are over. Especially with women like Jillian.

Women like Jillian want a man who's confident. Capable. A man who knows what to say and do. A man who knows how to walk the line between eager and interested.

"I—"

She holds one hand up, snapping it out between us as she cuts me off. "You know what? I don't even care." She takes a step closer to me, and I can't help but want to do the same, just to see if I can find out how she smells.

What it's like to be close enough to touch her.

"I know what you're up to and I came over here to tell you that it's not happening." Jillian takes another step my way, spine stiff and straight, chin lifted as she stares me down with a ferocity that heats my skin and only makes me even more fascinated by her.

She's a tiny thing. Smaller than I first realized, barely reaching my chin as she stabs one finger toward my face, the volume of her voice creeping up as she continues to yell at me.

"I've worked too hard to get where I am," Jillian drops the finger and pokes me in the center of my chest with it, "and I'm not letting you or anyone else push me out."

I reach up to rub over the spot where she touched me, distracted by both that tiny bit of contact and the nearness of her small frame. "I'm not pushing you out."

Her brows jump up behind the thick frame of her glasses. "You're not seriously going to try to tell me that you didn't come into my shop so you could start making plans for where you're going to put all your," her brown eyes leave my face for the first time to skim over the space around us, "exercise bullshit."

The dismissal of my chosen career snaps me out of my stupor.

I understand her anger with me. I've definitely fucked up when it comes to her.

But this business finally helped me find the peace and the pride that so many other people seem to naturally possess, and I won't let her take that from me. No matter how irresistible I find her.

"It's not bullshit. This place helps a lot of people." I hold her gaze as it widens the tiniest bit and her surprise makes me a little bolder. Bold enough to close the rest of the distance between us. "People like your friend Sylvia."

People like me.

Jillian holds her ground, but a little of the venom she came with subsides. "Fine. It's not bullshit." Her eyes narrow. "But my store isn't bullshit either." This time her pointing finger stabs toward her own face. "I help people too."

I recognize the passion in her voice. The clear love she has for her bookstore. "I don't disagree." I fight the urge to smile because I know my next words are going to piss her off. "That's why I would never call your books bullshit."

Jillian opens her mouth but quickly clamps it shut again, her full lips pressing into a thin line as she stares at me. After a few seconds, she huffs out a breath. "Fine." When she squares her delicate shoulders I know she's still not ready to back down from whatever brought her here. "Your business isn't bullshit." She lifts her pointed chin the tiniest bit. "But what you're doing absolutely is."

I'm not following, and it has nothing to do with the distraction of her presence. "What am I doing?"

She scoffs, staring at me like she can't believe what she's hearing. "Cut the shit, Noah. I got the letter today that Mauricio's not renewing my lease." Jillian's pitch ramps up again. "And I'm guessing it's because you talked him into letting you take over my space so you could expand."

I'm speechless. Does she think I'm that horrible of a person? All because I pretended not to remember her name?

It's almost as insulting as her calling the company I put my heart and soul into bullshit.

“I want a lot of things, Jillian.” I lean down so we're eye to eye, irritation keeping the nerves I fight in her presence at bay. “But your bookstore isn't one of them.”

CHAPTER THREE

“SO NOAH SAID he’s not trying to expand?” Elana works her way across the top of the bookshelves lined down the center of my shop, swiping at any dust that accumulated while I was working by myself over the weekend and didn’t have time to make sure things stayed spotless.

“Of course that’s what he said. Why would Noah admit he’s the reason Mauricio is trying to evict me?” I work my way down the deposit slip I’m filling out, getting ready for the bank run I have to make at lunch. “All he has to do is wait and hope that Mauricio doesn’t rat him out.”

Elana finishes up the shelf she’s working on and climbs down the step stool before dragging it to the next shelf over. “What did Mauricio say?”

“You know damn well he didn’t call me back.” If circumstances were different, I wouldn’t be as upset about Mauricio not renewing my lease. He’s not a great landlord and the strip mall *Spicy Stacks* has occupied since opening its doors isn’t exactly prime real estate. The building is deteriorating and Mauricio literally never answers his phone. That means any time something goes wrong, I have to leave a message and wait until he gets around to sending someone over, which is always a random and unannounced arrival.

“Why are we upset about moving then?” Elana leans across the shelving, managing to reach from one end to the other in a single swoop. “Maybe we can find a place that’s in better shape with an owner that actually returns phone calls.”

I press my lips together, attempting to position them in some sort of a hopeful smile. “Maybe.”

I can’t tell her the truth. Elana has been through so much shit in the past six months, and finding out that her job will no longer exist if our lease isn’t renewed would only add to the stress she’s under.

“There’s a really cute spot by Bella’s school that had a sign up in the window this morning when I dropped her off.” She comes back down the step stool, continuing to offer up assistance I can’t do anything with. “I can get the number when I go to pick her up if you want.”

I continue holding the expression that definitely doesn’t feel like the hopeful smile I intended. “Sure. That would be great.”

I feel terrible lying to her, but I’m not ready to give up just yet.

I’ve worked too hard to get here. Clawed my way through too many hours waiting tables and tending bar, socking away every penny I could, hoping that one day I would be able to save enough to make my dream a reality.

And I did. Sort of.

It turns out dreams are way more expensive than I initially realized, so I had to take out a loan to make up the difference. A loan I’m still paying off. One that has eaten up nearly every bit of available credit I have.

That’s why I have to stay here. Why I have to figure out a way to get Mauricio to renew my lease. I simply can’t afford not to.

I finish up the rest of my deposit, zipping it into the heavy-duty bank bag before shoving it down into my purse and slinging the boho style bag across my body. “You need anything while I’m out?”

Elana has moved on to organizing the books, making sure everything is still where it’s supposed to be after a weekend of chaos. “I’m good.” She shoots me a quick smile. “Unless you

drive past *Dave's*. Then I would love a Jalapeno Dog and some tater tots.”

I return her smile, the expression more genuine this time. “I can probably make that happen.”

Since she started working here a month before leaving her husband, Elana has pretty much become my best friend and I feel extremely protective of her. She’s sweet and kind and generous and sees the good in everyone around her. Unfortunately, people like that get taken advantage of. Especially when those people are women.

I grab my keys and head out into the warm air, breathing deeply as I cross the parking lot to the secondhand car I’ve been driving for almost a decade. It’s nothing fancy, but it still runs great and the air conditioning works, which is an absolute necessity during the Florida summers.

My first summer here after moving from Illinois, I thought I was going to freaking melt and seriously started questioning my life choices. But five years in, I’m finally used to the heat. To the point that the seventy-five-degree fall days almost feel chilly. Luckily today is a little warm for late November, with the temperature creeping up near eighty.

I slide into the driver’s seat, adjusting the hem of my overall jean shorts before starting up the engine and rolling down the windows as I pull out of the lot.

The bank is close and not super busy since most people do their banking online now, so I’m in and out in under ten minutes. *Dave’s Tots and Wieners* is a completely different story. As usual, the line is ridiculously long. But I know how much Elana loves it and, outside of her daughter, I’m not sure there’s much love in her life right now. So I’m happy to hang out and wait.

Thirty minutes later I’m back in my car, sneaking a few tater tots from the bag as I head back to the bookstore.

When I pull into the parking lot, I see Sylvia’s SUV situated in front of my shop and smile. She’s one of my best customers, bingeing nearly a book a day. I hop out of the car,

grabbing the bag of food and bumping the door closed with my hip before heading straight to my little corner of Sweet Side.

I go inside, expecting to see Sylvia standing at the counter chatting with Elana, but there's no sign of her. Elana watches me as I back across the shop, peeking down the aisles created by the tall bookshelves.

Her brows pinch together. "What are you doing?"

I look out the front windows, making sure it really is Sylvia's SUV. "Where's Sylvia?"

Elana's head tips back in understanding. "She and a bunch of her friends are next door." Her lips lift at the edges in a little grin. "They looked pretty darn wound up too."

"Good." I carry the bag of food into the tiny break room at the back of the store. "I hope they give him hell."

Sylvia has brought all her friends into my store before, and it was complete and utter chaos. The ladies are rowdy and loud and wild. Like they're trying to relive their twenties all over again, just without all the dutiful housewife bullshit that was forced down their throats the first time.

Elana purses her lips, eyes on me. "What if he's telling the truth? What if Noah's really not trying to take over this space?"

I almost roll my eyes. After all she's been through, all she's seen, I would think Elana might finally start to realize men aren't shit.

I mean, her ex literally tried to strangle her in front of their daughter when she left him. How can she still be defending men in any capacity? She should at least be as enlightened as I am.

And twice as angry.

"Men lie." I tug at the bun twisted at the top of my head, trying to loosen the pull giving me a headache. "It's what they do."

My mother drilled that fact into my head from the moment my dad walked out—leaving both of us behind when he started a new life with a different woman—making it clear we only mattered to him until we didn't.

“Not all men.” Elana offers up the weak rebuttal so many penis owners rely on to plead their case.

“Not all tigers will eat my face off, but that doesn't mean I'm going around kissing them on the lips.” I point to the back room, the minor improvement in my mood gone completely. “Go eat before your lunch gets cold.”

Elana almost looks like she wants to keep arguing with me, but the lure of her favorite food saves us both and she finally disappears into the back, leaving me alone in the quiet store I have to figure out how to save. Because I'm not going back to waiting tables and pouring drinks.

I flop down onto the stool behind the register, blowing out a frustrated breath as I dig the deposit bag from my purse and shove both items into their designated spots beneath the counter. Then I spend the next few minutes deciding which books I want to order for the shop, scanning the top sellers on Amazon before checking my ordering options to see which authors have their books available for retailers. I get lucky and find a few titles that I think my customer base will love and place an order to replenish everything I sold over the weekend.

Then I do the same with the stock of high-end sexual aids that sell almost as fast as the books on my shelves.

Technically, *I* should be the one looking to expand. My sales would definitely benefit from a whole room dedicated to the female-friendly devices I currently keep squirreled away, safely out of sight since my bookish customers regularly come in with their kiddos in tow.

It's one more reason I have to figure out how to keep this shop open. Business is booming and I'm finally getting ahead of the bills I've been juggling since opening five years ago.

I'm just finishing up placing the second of my orders when movement outside the window draws my attention to the

parking lot.

Sylvia and her friends are a blur of neon colored spandex as they make their way to her car. Clearly Noah went easy on them, because the fivesome still seems to have plenty of spring in their steps. They're all dancing around, hands in the air and wiggling their hips as Noah tries to corral them toward Sylvia's vehicle. It's obvious they are having an enormous amount of fun making the task as difficult as possible for him, so I stand from the stool and make my way to the window, watching smugly as he attempts to control what is most definitely uncontrollable.

Sylvia dances a circle around him before she starts pumping her hip into his, matching the rhythm of a song I'm guessing only exists in her own head, as her friends clap in time with each bump of Sylvia's body.

Those women certainly dance to the beat of their own drum. It's part of the reason I'm so fond of them. I love seeing women give society's expectations a giant middle finger. I love seeing women take control of their happiness and live up to no one else's expectations but their own.

But I especially love watching women give men the shit they deserve. Especially men like Noah.

He might think taking my shop from me will be easy, but I wasn't raised to let a man walk all over me. Quite the opposite, actually. My mother taught me to always be the one doing the walking.

Watching Noah struggle with Sylvia and her friends brings a tiny bit of joy to this shitty, shitty day.

But then I notice Noah seems to be enjoying himself just as much as the group of women milling around him. He's smiling wide, his movements coordinated and easy as he catches Sylvia's hand and spins her away before pulling her close and dipping her back.

It's an odd thing to see. Every time I've been forced to interact with him he seemed tense and uptight. Rigid and

arrogant. But that's not at all how Noah appears right now. Right now he seems to be relaxed and in his element.

But there's no way a man who looks the way he does would ever be in his element surrounded by a group of grandmas. It's got to be another act. Another lie hidden beneath the charming exterior he tries to wear.

Though I'm not sure exactly what the point of it would be.

All my life I've known one thing: all men have a single endgame planned. Sex. It's the reason for every word they say and every interaction they have. Hell, maybe even every breath they take.

And once they decide they're done with you, they move on, ready to find something fresh and new.

But I'm pretty sure Noah isn't trying to get into Sylvia's pants. At least I hope not.

I step closer to the glass as he loads the women into Sylvia's car, looking for any hint of what his motivation might be. It's not until he closes the door and slaps one hand against the roof of the expensive SUV that it dawns on me.

Money. He's realized Sylvia is loaded and plans to milk her for all he can.

Son of a—

I let out a little yelp as Noah turns, his eyes immediately meeting mine. Unfortunately my first reaction to being caught staring at him is to drop to the tile, like being lower will make me less obvious through the floor-to-ceiling windows that make up the front wall of my shop. I crawl sideways because I've already committed to this plan, attempting to hide behind one of the large plants I keep set against the window, watching through the leaves in horror as Noah's eyes fix on my new location.

He stares at me for a few long seconds as I hold completely still, unwilling to budge from my spot. Leaving it now would be like admitting that he caught me, and I'm not admitting shit.

Especially when it comes to him.

So we're stuck in a standoff neither of us seems willing to abandon.

At least we are until Noah finally drops my gaze, making me smirk. But my smug smile slips when I realize he only looked away because he's now focused on the door to my store. I barely have time to frantically pull off a few leaves as he jogs across the parking lot and comes straight inside.

I focus on my already pruned plant, ignoring Noah as he comes to stand at my side. He's silent, so I just keep pulling perfectly good foliage loose, pretending I'm completely unaware of his existence.

It's a ridiculous plan, but I can't think of anything better, so I've just got to go with it.

"Jillian."

The sharpness in his voice is surprising. It's also irritating and sends me shooting upright.

Sort of.

I've been crouched down just long enough to make my legs and balance a little wonky. Instead of making a vertical path upright, I careen off to one side.

"Woah." Noah steps forward as I start to tip, catching my bare arms in his solid grip and easily straightening me out.

His dark eyes crinkle a little at the edges as he holds me steady. "Looks like you could use a little help strengthening your core."

CHAPTER FOUR

“ARE YOU COMING on to me?” Jillian looks outraged.

Like I’m the one who’s making this interaction weird.

But for once, that’s not the case, and it makes me feel like I have the upper hand for the first time with her.

“No. I’m pointing out that if you had a stronger core you would have an easier time standing up after spending so long hiding behind a plant.” I can’t stop myself from pointing out the fact that I know she was attempting to hide from me after I caught her blatantly staring at me across the parking lot. Granted, she was doing it with a frown on her face, but I’m needy enough that any attention from her counts as good attention.

Especially now that I’m standing close to her. Feeling the softness of her skin under my palms. Which should probably come to an end.

I pull my hands from her arms, releasing Jillian slowly to make sure she’s got her footing before bracing my palms against my hips. “And since you’re clearly curious, Sylvia and her friends had a great workout today.”

Jillian crosses both arms over her chest, jutting her hips to one side. “Obviously.”

“Don’t look so upset. You’re always more than welcome to come join in the fun.” I’m not sure where the teasing words or tone come from. I usually have less than no control over what comes out of my mouth when I talk to a woman. A fact that’s gotten me exactly zero dates in the past year. But for some

reason my mouth isn't screwing up as bad as normal today. Probably because I feel like right now we're on a level playing field.

I'm no longer the only one who's made an ass of themselves.

Jillian lifts her chin, tapping one foot like I'm wasting her time. "Is that what you came here to tell me? That Sylvia just loved working out with you?"

"No, actually." Something about her attitude makes me want to smile. Or maybe it's mine that has me feeling calm and confident in a way I haven't before. "I came to let you know I have a call in to Mauricio. I'm sure whatever's going on with your lease is a big misunderstanding and I want to make sure we get it straightened out."

Jillian rolls her eyes to the ceiling. "Right." Her tone is dry and sarcastic. "And I'm sure you expect me to be filled with appreciation that a big strong man has swooped in to take care of a problem for little old me."

Now I definitely can't stop my smile. "I'm pretty sure you don't need anyone to handle anything for you, Jillian." She's smaller than average, but the only thing little about her is her stature. It's clear she's ready and willing to take on anyone in her path. It's one of many reasons I'm drawn to her. I like her confidence. Her complete faith in herself.

Both are things I've struggled to find all my life, and seeing how easily she possesses them is as fucking irresistible as the scowl she always shoots my way.

"But since you seemed sure I was responsible for it, I wanted to make sure I did my part in clearing it up." I don't have anything to do with the issues she's having with Mauricio or her lease, but I won't pass up an opportunity to show Jillian I'm not what she thinks.

What I've accidentally led her to believe.

Jillian snorts. "Sure you're not."

She's definitely not believing anything I have to say, making it clear there's nothing I can do to smooth this over right now. Eventually she'll figure it out though, once

Mauricio explains what's going on. Then all I have to figure out is how to repair the damage I did accidentally do.

"You don't have to believe me." I hold my hands up in surrender. "But it's true."

A group of women files in through the door behind me, chatting amongst themselves as they wander to the shelves of books filling Jillian's shop. Her eyes leave me to fix on them and her expression smooths out as she drops both arms to her sides and walks past me without a word, attaching herself to their group with a smile and offer of assistance.

I know when I've been dismissed by a woman. It's happened more times than I can count. I turn toward the back of the shop, catching Elana's eye where she's sitting in the breakroom. She gives me an apologetic smile and a wave. I shake my head and shrug, tossing up a return wave before leaving them to the rest of their afternoon. I need to get moving anyway. If I'm late for my next clients I'll catch complete hell.

I check in at the gym, making sure everyone is doing okay and that Kelsey can still close up shop even though she's done it every Monday for the past year. I know it annoys her that I still double-check, but she's just going to have to be annoyed. This business is everything to me and I won't leave anything unchecked when it's involved.

Once I'm sure the place will be fine without me, I pack up my bag, lock my office and head out to the parking lot. I'm almost at my Jeep when I feel eyes on me, the weight of a gaze creeping up the back of my neck.

I don't have to turn to know who it is, but I do anyway, just to see what she'll do. If she'll try to hide her nosiness again.

It takes me a second to find Jillian, to identify the slightly tousled blonde bun peeking out at me over the top of a row of books lining the shelf she's currently trying to hide behind. I wait her out, knowing she won't be able to resist the urge to take another peek for long.

When her right eye slides into view I smile and raise my hand in a wave, making it clear I've caught her watching me again. Like last time, Jillian jumps. As if she's surprised I figured out what's going on. But instead of hitting the floor and hiding behind whatever might offer cover, she steps out so I can see all of her, assuming the normal stance she has in my presence. Arms crossed, lips frowning, eyes narrowed.

She'd probably stop if she knew how much I love that scowl. It's so much easier to deal with than the placating smiles I usually get. The ones that make it clear I might look like a different man, but the outside of me is the only thing that's changed. I'm still that overweight, pimply kid that's so eager for acceptance that he makes every conversation weird and awkward because he has no idea how to be anything else.

But Jillian's never smiled in my presence, even a placating one. Not unless I want to count the snarly smirk she offers up occasionally, and I don't.

Maybe that's another reason I can't make myself leave her alone. I like seeing people smile. I like showing them how great they can feel and how happy they can be in spite of the bullshit we all go through.

I could make her smile too. I know I could. Just definitely not until Mauricio tells her I'm not trying to take her bookstore.

I let my eyes linger on her a few seconds longer before opening the door to my Jeep and climbing inside, ending the standoff she doesn't give up, even as I pull away, watching her frown follow me in the rearview mirror.

THE CROWD FOR my Monday night strength training class in the community space at Shady Glen Assisted Living seems a little thinner than normal.

I carry my bag of equipment to the front of the room as the women and men I see twice a week line up, helped through the process by the aides that care for them.

When I first started coming here three years ago, I struggled to feel anything but sadness. Now, this place serves as a sort of home away from home for me. One that represents more good memories than bad.

I start handing out the resistance bands we use for the class, greeting each person by name. Asking how they are. Pretending it doesn't bother me when they don't know we've met before.

I check the door, looking for a specific face as I work my way around the room, making sure everybody is excited for the time we're about to spend together. It's not until every band is handed out and I've taken my place back at the front of the room that the person I've been waiting for finally decides to show up.

Ruth shuffles in on her walker, looking a little more disheveled than normal.

My heart sinks at the sight of her. At what this change in her appearance probably means. It forces me to face the fact that soon this place will have a few more bad memories trying to tip the scale.

I grab one of the loosest resistance bands I have and carry it over to her spot in the front row. "I was starting to worry you weren't going to show up."

Ruth drops down into the chair she's occupied every Monday and Thursday for the past three years, giving me a scowl. "Don't you give me your shit. I'm almost a hundred years old. What do you want from me?" She snaps the band from my hand. "Us old ladies need a nap every once in a while." She squints up at me from behind her glasses. "It improves our dispositions."

I bark out a laugh, pushed hard by the relief of seeing that Ruth is exactly the same today as she was last week. I know one day that won't be the case, but I'm happy as hell that day isn't today.

I give her a wink. "You might need to add another nap to your busy schedule then."

Ruth pulls back one end of the exercise band, stretching it as far as she can before letting it go, shooting the blue strip directly at my middle. “Smartass.”

I catch the band before it can bounce down to the floor, grinning wide. I needed this. Needed to feel like I was around people who actually understand me.

Because that doesn’t happen often.

I give Ruth her band back, booping her on the end of her nose before taking my place at the front of the room and slowly working the group through a set of repetitions designed to help them continue to retain as much mobility and independence as possible. For most of the people in the room, it’s a losing battle. One no amount of afternoon workout classes will ever be able to win. But some physical activity is always better than no physical activity.

We spend about thirty minutes working on arm and leg strength, two of the most important areas to keep their mobility up as much as possible. A few of the aides participate, watching as I show them modified options so they can get a little more out of what we’re doing. I’m happy to work with whoever shows up, whether its residents, employees, or family members. Adding physical activity and strength training to your daily routine can be life changing, and I take full advantage of any opportunity to pass it along.

By the time we’re finishing up, a few of the residents are starting to nod off and a handful of others are obviously getting worn out. Hopefully that means everyone will sleep well tonight and feel stronger in the morning. Wake up knowing they took back some of their control over a body that’s currently working against them.

I pack up all my bands as the room clears out, aides taking the residents that need a little more help back to their rooms while everyone else files out. Eventually, it’s just me and Ruth. Dragging a chair over to where she’s waiting, I drop down beside her, letting out a long breath as I sling one arm over the rail of her walker. “How are you feeling?”

Ruth lifts both her arms and wiggles them in the air. “Like a noodle.”

I try not to look disappointed. “Have you been doing the exercises I give you?”

Every week I leave Ruth with a few moves she can do on her own to help maintain as much muscle tone as she can, but so far she’s been pretty lax about doing them.

“I haven’t had time.” She reaches up to fluff at the silvery gray hair curled tightly to her scalp. “I have a social life.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “At least one of us does.”

Ruth’s eyes narrow behind her glasses, studying me in a way I’m all too familiar with. “Does that mean you still haven’t asked that girl next door out on a date?”

“I’ve been busy.” I give her the same explanation she gave me, knowing my lie is just as big as hers.

“Psshht.” Ruth flicks one hand at me, dismissing my claim. “Too busy doing what? Working?” She leans forward. “Your grandmother would be downright brokenhearted to know her sweet grandson was sitting at home alone every night instead of enjoying his life.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t enjoying my life.” I do enjoy my life. I’ve worked hard to be able to say that. Walked away from one career to start over for exactly that reason. “And I don’t sit at home alone at night.” I grin. “I have Barnaby to keep me company.”

Ruth rolls her eyes, looking disgusted. “Barnaby is an asshole.” She points one crooked finger at me. “And he’s old as hell. One day he’ll die, just like me. And then where will you be?”

Those are two things I don’t want to think about. “I guess you’ll just have to live forever so we don’t have to find out.”

Ruth huffs out a bitter sounding laugh. “No one wants to live like this forever. Not being able to move around the way you want or see the way you want or hear the way you want gets old real quick.”

My chest gets tight because I know my grandmother felt the same way. She was the one who made sure I understood that finding happiness wasn't something I should put off, because one day I wouldn't have that opportunity anymore. That's why I left my corporate job—one that I racked up thousands of dollars in student loans to obtain—and refocused on what made me happy.

What I could use to make others happy.

“How about I make you a deal?” Ruth looks me up and down, pursing her lips. “I'll do my exercises if you ask that girl out on a date.”

I shake my head. “Now is not a good time.”

“How can this not be a good time?” She motions at me with both hands. “You're good-looking, successful, smart, and charming. Don't wait until you're ready or something else won't be.”

“I'm not the issue.” I tip my head to the side, cringing a little because that's not entirely true. “Technically.”

Ruth's creased lips press into a frown. “What does that mean?”

“It means I might not have given her the best impression of who I am. Now I've got to figure out how to fix that.”

Ruth shakes her head, her disappointment in me clear. “I've told you to just be yourself, haven't I?”

I drop my eyes and tuck my chin. “Yes, ma'am.”

“And did you listen?”

I shake my head. “No, ma'am.”

“You have to be yourself because everyone else is taken.” She reaches out to poke me in the knee with one finger. “Just be who you really are and I promise that girl will love you.”

It's sound advice. There's only one problem with it.

I don't actually know how to be who I am.

CHAPTER FIVE

JILLIAN

“YOU KNOW THAT’S a federal offense, right?” Elana eyes me as I tear open the business-sized envelope that just arrived.

“He can sue me.” I pull out the paper folded inside, looking it over as disappointment ruins my already terrible mood.

Elana rounds the counter, coming to peek over my shoulder. “What is it?”

I press the paper to my chest, hiding it from view as I turn my head her way. “I thought this was a federal offense?”

“I didn’t tell you not to do it. I was just making sure you understood the ramifications involved.” Elana jerks her chin toward the paper. “Let me see it.”

I flip the junk mail her way. “It’s old-school spam.”

When the mailman accidentally delivered a letter for Noah to my shop I thought I finally had the proof I was seeking. It was in the same kind of envelope Mauricio sent my lease non-renewal letter in and I assumed it would contain Noah’s new lease information. The one I’m sure will now include the square footage of my store.

“Man, they must be really hard up for real estate in Florida.” Elana shakes her head as she scans the solicitation. “And what kind of house is Noah living in that they’re sending purchase requests to his business to try to buy it from him?”

I steal the letter away, haphazardly shoving it back in the envelope before chucking it in the trash. “It’s a scam. They

just want to find people stupid enough to give them personal information.”

Elana huffs out a little laugh. “It looks like they already have his information. They know where he lives. Where he works. How much his house is worth.” She cringes a little. “It’s kind of scary if you think about it.”

“I guess it’s a good thing we’re renters then, huh? No one cares enough to dig through all our information.” I check the time on my phone and go lock the door, flipping off the neon sign glowing in the window to make sure no one thinks we’re still open.

Normally, I wouldn’t care if somebody tried to come in after hours—I’m happy to sell books and vibrators any time a woman wants to buy them—but tonight I’m fucking tired. I’m over all of it. I just want to go home, put on my pajamas, have a few drinks, and zone out in front of the television. Tomorrow I’ll be more motivated and ready to tackle this whole unfortunate situation, but tonight I really think I just need to wallow.

“Today was a good day.” Elana runs the sales numbers on the tablet we use as a register before counting through the money in our tray, pulling out everything over the standard collection of change we keep on hand. She zips it into the deposit bag then locks the whole thing into the safe. “Almost as good as a weekend day.”

“That’s awesome.” I try to sound excited, because it really is awesome, but I just can’t seem to muster any enthusiasm. I’ve worked so hard to build this business from nothing and I was finally starting to get somewhere. Getting that letter from Mauricio literally felt like someone was ripping the rug right out from under me just as I found my balance.

“Oh, yeah.” Elana hauls her purse from under the counter, dropping it onto the surface before digging through the bag. “I got that number for you.”

“Great.” No matter how hard I try, there’s no way to pack any excitement or energy into the word, but Elana doesn’t seem to notice. Thank God, because she’s one of the sweetest

people I've ever met and I don't want her to think I don't appreciate everything she does.

My only employee and only friend whips out a receipt with ten digits scrawled across the back in blue ink, holding it up. "I had Bella write it down as I drove past." She turns it numbers' side toward her, looking over her daughter's handiwork. "I thought she did pretty well."

"She did amazingly well." I finally find a little bit of a smile. "I can tell she's been working really hard on her writing."

Elana passes off the phone number. "It's because she wants to learn how to read so bad." She points at me. "She's decided she wants to be just like Miss Jillian when she grows up."

The sentiment is flattering, but definitely misplaced. "You should probably talk her into aiming a little higher."

Elana mocks shock. "Higher than being a business owner and empowerer of women of all ages?" She shakes her head. "I don't think that's possible."

It's definitely possible, but I'm not excited about explaining the reasons for that, so I'm going to let her have this one. "Well tell her as soon as she's ready, I will stock a whole shelf of books just for her."

It's something I've been thinking about doing anyway since a large number of my customers bring their kids with them. I'd initially wanted this to be a place strictly for women, but as depressing as it is, women still seem to bear the brunt of childcare. Offering books for kids will make the time they spend here a little easier since their kiddos will have something to look at.

Elana beams at me, proving that I'm definitely on the right track. "She will love that."

"Of course she will. Books are amazing." I smile, feeling the tiniest bit better for a split second.

Until I remember I might not have a bookstore to stock Bella's books in soon.

I turn off the light in the back room as Elana fishes out her keys. When I come back to grab my own purse, crouching down behind the counter to pull it out, the trash can catches my eye. Before I can really think it through, I reach in and pull out the junk mail with Noah's address, shoving it in my bag as I stand up and follow Elana out into the parking lot. We say our goodbyes and I wait in my car until she pulls away, just so I know she makes it on her way safely. Then I pull out and head home, skipping my normal Monday night Chipotle stop and instead going straight to the tiny apartment I leased simply because it ate up as little of my income as possible.

I park in my designated spot behind the building and head in the back door, going to the staircase leading to the second-floor unit I call home. I barely make it up three steps before Mr. Rigellio's door opens.

I stop, knowing the timing isn't a coincidence.

"Jillian." My downstairs neighbor shuffles onto the welcome mat outside his door. "Could I trouble you for a little assistance?"

I put on a smile even though all I want is to pour some vodka on the day and pull the covers over my head. "Of course." I come back down the few stairs I managed to climb. "And you are never any trouble."

He gives me a sly smile. "That's not what my wife used to say."

"She was just trying to flatter you." I follow him into his apartment, unsurprised to see his laptop is situated on the two-seat dining table tucked into the nook beside the kitchen. "Are you having issues with Zoom again?"

"This dang thing is going to be the death of me." He frowns at the screen. "I've been trying to get it to work for fifteen minutes."

I bend to scan the display, counting to thirty before I suck in a surprised sounding breath. "Oop." I click the internet icon and reconnect his wireless. "Looks like that darn internet decided to kick you off again."

He gives me a sheepish grin as I open the Zoom window. “It must know I’m trouble too.”

I help him get through the next few steps, staying until his daughter’s face is smiling back at him. I offer her a wave before I let myself out and race up the stairs, ready to hide away for the rest of the night.

Letting myself in, I immediately drop my bag onto the tiny table that sits directly above Mr. Rigellio’s. Our apartments are the exact same floor plan, but mine has a slightly better view. Instead of staring out into the side of the house next door, my windows overlook the rooftops of the quaint neighborhood our ageing building borders.

I pause, debating my next move, and end up settling on mixing up a drink. Skipping the vodka I initially intended, I go straight for the tequila, rimming my glass in Tajín before pouring in a Margarita. I carry my drink into the bedroom where I strip off my clothes and bra, replacing them with a pair of knit shorts and an oversized T-shirt. Once everything’s been chucked into the laundry I move the party out onto the tiny balcony, relaxing back into the single chair that fits in the space. Kicking my bare feet up on the railing, I guzzle my drink.

Normally sitting out here relaxes me. Listening to the sounds of the not-so-distant ocean while I dream about a future I always hoped would include one of the houses I look over nearly every night. Less than a week ago that felt within my reach. I was paying my debts down. The bookstore was making more money every month. I was finally getting where I wanted to be.

But now it’s all slipping away from me. The bookstore. The money. The dream.

I down what’s left of my drink, drop my feet to the floor, and go back to the kitchen to pour another. This time I use a slightly heavier hand, needing something to take the edge off the stress reeling my shoulders against my ears.

Because it’s not just my life that will be affected if the store closes. Elana’s will be affected too and, as a result, her

little girl's. There aren't many workplaces that will be as flexible as I am and probably even fewer that will pay her as well as I do. *I* shouldn't be paying her as well as I do—her checks have set me back by at least a year—but helping her out has been worth the sacrifice. She deserves to catch a break and it made me feel good to offer her one.

But right now, I'm the one who needs to catch a break. Unfortunately since I still haven't heard from Mauricio, the chances of that happening are dwindling fast.

I tip a little more tequila into my glass, taking a quick swig directly from the bottle before recapping it and carrying my new, stronger drink back to the balcony. This time when I sit down, I don't put my feet up. I can't relax. Can't sit still. I thought I wanted to drink my problems away, but I can't stop from feeling like I need to do something. Like I need to fix this somehow.

Abandoning any hopes of relaxing on the balcony, I lock the slider before shoving my bare feet into the rubbery, butter-colored, cushiony slides I keep close. I'm almost to my front door when I realize I've still got a giant margarita in my hand, and wandering outside with an open container probably isn't a completely bright idea.

I go to the kitchen and dump the drink into my favorite lidded cup, taking a long swig from the straw before screwing everything into place.

There. No more open container. This one is securely closed.

I suck on the straw as I go for the door, eyes fixing on where my purse sits in the center of the table.

I should probably bring my keys. The building comes with a live-in security system in the shape of the four retirees who rent the downstairs units, so the chances of someone trying to get into my apartment are slim to none. But right now it seems stupid to tempt fate since she's already clearly pissed at me for some reason.

I flip open my purse and my eyes fall on the envelope I stuffed in there on a whim. I'm not sure why I brought it with me—

That's a lie. I know exactly why I brought it with me. So I could find out where Noah lives and maybe drop a bag of flaming dog shit on his porch.

It's an amazing plan. One that gets better the more tequila I drink. But it has one large flaw.

I don't have a dog.

I yank the envelope out and flip the paper free, scanning it for the address I all but ignored earlier in my aggravation. Maybe he'll live close to a dog park or a vet's office. Somewhere with entire trash cans filled with dog shit.

Oh my God.

I COULD LIGHT AN ENTIRE TRASH CAN OF DOG SHIT ON FIRE.

I chuckle as my eyes move to the bottom of the paper, imagining Noah's too handsome face when he realizes what's flaming on his porch. The laugh dies in my throat when I recognize the street listed in bold print just below his name.

No way. There's no freaking way he lives two blocks from me, happily inhabiting one of the houses I put in the future I might no longer have.

Red hot rage shoots me right out the door, sending me down the stairs, stomping as much as my squishy slides allow. The road listed is one street over, but the address isn't as close as I first expected, so by the time I'm staring down the single-story home, the sun is setting and I'm considering just squatting down to squeeze out a custom-made mess on his porch.

My brain is full of tequila, but not quite enough to make me follow through on that, so I stare at the open blinds on the windows, squinting like I might be able to see what's behind them from the sidewalk. I bet there's proof of what he's doing in that house. The lease I thought was accidentally delivered to my shop is probably sitting right on his dining room table.

I look up and down the street, making sure there's no witnesses, then I rush through the side yard, making it to the cover of the bushes just as headlights cut across the front of the house.

I peek around the corner as Noah's Jeep pulls into the garage, because of course it does. The universe just wanted to tease me with an opportunity it planned to rip away.

The universe must be a man.

I jump a little as the lights inside Noah's house start to flip on, revealing the rooms behind the blinds, tempting me to come closer. I follow the illumination as it moves through the house, tracking his path. I stop at the back corner, the sound of a sliding door opening as a six-foot privacy fence stops me in my rubbery tracks.

I peek through a tiny gap between the wood planks, catching a glimpse of Noah as he steps out onto the patio and drags his shirt over his head.

Oh my damn.

I might hate the guy, but there's no denying how well he's put together. Every muscle in his midsection is tight and toned, from the curve of his pecs to the ripple of his abs. I'm staring at the deep V-cut disappearing into his shorts when I realize I've lost it.

No way would I be staring at Noah like this if I was in my right mind. I'm definitely too tequilad to be here right now. I need to go.

I turn, fully intending to leave, when I hear something that makes me pause. The words are garbled and slurred, but they still make my stomach drop.

“Motherfucker! I'll kill you!”

CHAPTER SIX

NOAH

I FLIP THE lid off the hot tub, sighing as I go back in the house, leaving the slider open behind me. “You aren’t going to kill anybody, asshole.” I open Barnaby’s cage, waiting as he climbs out and up the side. “Can’t I relax outside just once without having to take you with me?”

Barnaby reaches the top of his cage, lifting the yellow feathers on his head as he eyes me. “*Motherfucker.*”

“Sure. I’m the motherfucker.” I yank my shirt back on, knowing it’s only a matter of time before he comes at me. I barely have it in place before the cockatoo launches my way, flailing his clipped wings around as he lands on my shoulder, gripping tight as I snag a beer from the fridge and head back outside.

I spent the last few days working through my frustration with myself the only way I know how, and after hours on the treadmill and endless reps with the free weights, my muscles are screaming for relief. Realizing just how bad I fucked up with Jillian gave me a little too much motivation, and today I’m feeling the effects in a big way.

I reach the edge of the hot tub that has gotten me through more sore nights than I can remember, setting my beer down on the edge before relocating Barnaby to the perch positioned right beside the tub. He grabs the bar tight, bobbing his head as he repeats one of his favorite words as loud as he possibly can. “*Motherfucker. Motherfucker. Motherfucker.*”

He's the primary reason I bought this house instead of one more centrally located. The neighbors on each side of me are angled in a way that I don't worry about Barnaby's constant cussing offending them, plus my yard backs up to a public green space. It's got a walking path for days I feel like taking a jog and the three-foot-high stone retaining wall bordering it offers an added layer of privacy where it practically butts up against my fence.

I yank off my T-shirt and shuck my shorts, dropping them to the stamped cement, before easing into the hot water, sinking down against the jets. I grab my beer and drink down a few swallows before sliding deeper, letting my head relax against one of the cushions as I close my eyes, doing my best to ignore Barnaby's continued rants.

I'm just beginning to relax when I hear an odd scuffling noise. Barnaby must hear it too because he stretches his wings out and switches from his favorite word to his favorite phrase. *"I'll kill you."*

Like my visits to Shady Glen, Barnaby's presence used to be a sad reminder, but over the years I've learned to find humor in the limited vocabulary he picked up from the action movies my grandmother blared at full volume. She would have found the fact that he refuses to learn anything else fucking hilarious and so I try to find it hilarious too.

Barnaby flaps his wings a couple more times, but I don't hear the noise again, so I close my eyes, letting the movement of the water relax away the stress I can't seem to exercise into oblivion.

Stress that is primarily due to the teeny blonde woman I have probably ruined my chances with. A fact that I'm even more upset about now than I was before. Watching Jillian hit the floor like she was on fire when I caught her watching me through the window today was the most hilarious damn thing I've seen in a long time. Almost as funny as when I caught her peeking out at me the second time.

And then there's that damn scowl. That frown that pulls me in like a magnet.

It's probably worthy of a few visits with a therapist, but all I see when she glares at me is a challenge. One that I don't want to walk away from.

Unfortunately, I may have to, because sexy, sour-pants Jillian seems to hate my freaking—

“Aaaaagh—”

The sharp yelp is the only warning I get before something comes crashing into my hot tub, tipping right over the top of the privacy fence and splashing water everywhere. My face, the patio, even Barnaby, are all caught in the fallout zone, and it sends him into another curse-laden fit.

“*Motherfucker.*” He flaps his wings as I swipe the water from my eyes. “*I’ll fucking kill you.*”

I squawk louder than he does when something brushes across my naked dick. “Jesus Christ.” I scramble back, managing to get my ass onto the edge of the hot tub just as the thing in the water bobs to the churning surface.

Then pokes above it.

I stare in complete disbelief at the top half of a familiar head. “Jillian?”

Her eyes are wide and a little glassy as they focus on me, the water sloshing against the tip of her chin.

Her presence has startled me enough that I freeze in shock and don't immediately notice what she's staring at. Once I realize she's gawking at my exposed dick there's no hiding the immediate reaction her attention causes.

I clamp one hand over my rapidly thickening cock as I swing my legs out of the tub, doing my best not to give her a front row seat to the crack of my ass as I fumble around for my shorts. “What in the hell are you doing here?”

Jillian looks from me to Barnaby as my grandmother's pet continues to rant, stringing together all the words he knows in one long, incoherent garble of sounds.

I wrestle my shorts up my wet legs, managing to get them into place even as my dick continues to react to the fact that

seconds ago some part of Jillian came into full contact with that part of me.

“*Jillian.*” I make my voice sharp so her focus comes back my way. “What in the hell are you doing here?”

I’m not sure if it’s my volume or my tone, but she finally narrows her eyes at me. “I was trying to help you, jerk.” She stands up, swiping at the strands of wet hair sticking to her skin. “I heard someone say they were going to kill you and I was looking to see what was going on and lost my balance.”

I should be flattered. Thrilled that she cared enough to attempt to intervene in my theoretical murder.

But all I can do is stare at her tits.

The thin fabric of the T-shirt she’s wearing is soaked through and sticking to her skin in a see-through layer that’s leaving nothing to my imagination. And right now my undersexed brain is shorting out at the sight of her tight nipples poking at the wet cling of the fabric.

I’ve seen boobs before. Plenty of them.

Just not many in real life, and my inability to do anything but stare is a prime example of why that is.

Luckily, Jillian doesn’t seem to notice my hyperfocus. Instead she’s ranting along with Barnaby as she tries to fight her way out of the hot tub. A hot tub I will never be able to sit in again without suffering from a raging hard on.

“Why in the hell do you have a bird that threatens to kill you?”

“He’s not mine.” The words come out on their own since my brain is still unable to do anything but soak in the sight of her. “He’s my grandma’s.”

Jillian reaches the edge of the tub and stops, frowning as she looks over the side. “Your grandma has a bird that screams *motherfucker* at the top of its lungs?”

“Yes.” I blink, trying desperately to make myself look away from her. “I mean, she did.”

Jillian grips the edge of the tub, giving Barnaby a glare. “He seems to be pretty alive, so I’d say she still does.”

The mention of my grandma helps me find a train of thought that doesn’t involve Jillian or all the wicked things I’ve imagined doing to put a smile on her face. “Barnaby isn’t the issue. My grandma is. She died a couple of years ago.”

Jillian’s focus comes back to me, her expression different than I’ve seen it before. “Oh.” She swipes at her hair again, trying to work the offending strand into the matted wad hanging from the top of her head. “I’m sorry.”

I shrug, not because it doesn’t matter, but because I can’t change it. “She had dementia, so her death was kind of a relief.” I step toward the edge of the tub. “She wasn’t happy, and there’s no point in living if you’re not happy.” I slowly reach one hand toward Jillian, offering to help her from the tub.

Her dark eyes dip to my wet fingers and she hesitates for just a second before taking it, gripping tightly as she tries to slide free. But getting out of a hot tub can be tricky if you’re not used to it. She’s a lot smaller than I am, so her feet don’t reach the cement patio as easily as mine do and she starts sliding sideways along the edge, flailing a little as she struggles to keep from falling off the side.

I manage to catch her before she goes down, but the rescue comes at a price—one I’m sure I’ll be paying for indefinitely.

Jillian’s body ends up pressed against mine as I hook one arm around her waist and pull her upright, the wet slick of her skin only making my cock harder.

Her eyes drop down in the general direction of my offending appendage. “Do you have a boner right now?”

There’s no way to lie. No way to claim it’s anything but what it is. “Just a little one.”

She snorts and I almost think it sounds like a laugh. “Very self-deprecating.” She wiggles free of my hold, pushing against my chest to put some space between us. “I wouldn’t expect that from you.” Her eyes linger over the front of my

shorts before moving to where Barnaby is still losing his shit. “Should you do something about him?”

I probably should, but right now I’m more interested in doing something about her. “Let me get you a towel.” I turn and go into the house, adjusting the tent in my pants the second I’m out of sight. I keep a stash of towels in the half bath just off the great room and I hurry to snag one, but I’m not even on my way back when I hear Jillian let out another yelp that gets my feet moving faster.

Towel in hand, I rush out through the still open door to find her standing perfectly still, eyes lifted to where Barnaby’s claws grip the mass of hair at the top of her head, that scowl I love so much twisted across her lips.

Her glare comes my way. “If your bird shits on me I swear to God I’ll kill you.”

“*I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!*” Barnaby immediately picks up on her mention of his favorite phrase, rocking his head as he repeats it at the top of his lungs.

Jillian’s eyes lift back to the bird clinging to her wet hair and slowly her scowl starts to change. The deep dip of her lips flattens out before barely curving up at the edges in what might be the beginning of a smile.

But the change is gone almost immediately, her expression flattening out as she puts her hands on her hips. “Are you going to get him, or what?”

“Yes.” I move in, being careful not to rush the cockatoo too fast so he doesn’t start to flap around. “Just hold still.”

“Do I look like I’m moving?” Jillian crosses her arms as I come close and I decide to wrap the towel around her first.

She shivers a little as I tuck it across her shoulders and lap the ends across her chest, proving it was the right move. Her fingers come to grip the edges, pulling the thick terrycloth tighter around her small body. “Thanks.”

I almost get distracted by her soft *thanks*, but I can’t let that happen. Not until Barnaby is back on his perch. Or at least out of her hair.

I curl my fingers into a loose fist and rest my knuckles against his belly, offering him something new to hang onto, but Barnaby doesn't budge.

I bump him a little harder, trying to prod him into moving, but he just screams in my face.

It would figure he would be a complete asshole right now.

I reach for his feet, planning to wind them free of Jillian's bun so I can take him and lock him up, but Barnaby sees me coming and immediately starts flapping his wings. Jillian's shoulders hunch and her eyes scrunch closed as the bird flails away from me, moving down the back of her scalp before grabbing onto the towel at her shoulder, positioning as much of his body behind her head as possible.

Jillian reaches up to dig at the mess of hair barely contained by her rubber band. "At least he's not going to shit in my hair anymore." Her eyes drop to the bright white towel enfolding her frame. "Now it's your stuff he's going to shit on."

I couldn't care less if he shits on my towel, but I'm on thin ice with this woman right now and Barnaby certainly isn't helping that fact.

"Come on, Barnaby. Leave her alone." I reach for him again, but the bird uses the bunched-up towel at Jillian's neck like a tightrope, sidestepping around the back of her head to perch on her other shoulder. He flaps at my hand, somehow managing to avoid smacking Jillian in the face. Then the damn bird leans into her ear and says the first civil words that have come out of his beak in years. "*Hello there.*"

Jillian's scowl twists around, this time making its way into what is definitely some semblance of a smile.

I sigh, not sure if I'm more upset over how Barnaby's acting or that he's been able to make her smile before I have. "I think he likes you."

Jillian turns her head, eyeing Barnaby before cautiously poking a few fingers out from under the towel to stroke down his chest. "He has good taste."

Once again Jillian manages to dig into the meat of why she appeals to me. She literally just fell over a fence into my hot tub, accidentally touching my dick and soaking herself to the bone in the process, and she's still standing here fully confident in who she is. There's no hint of embarrassment or shame on her face at all.

And that is appealing as hell to someone like me.

Someone who analyzes every word that comes out of their mouth, looking for ways it could be misconstrued or misunderstood. Someone who replays every humiliating moment from their life at night instead of falling asleep. Someone who obsesses over what other people think of them to the point that it's hard to function.

I thought I would outgrow it. Hoped that building muscles and changing the way the world saw me would hurry the process along.

But it turns out it's way easier to change your outside than it is to change the inside.

And unfortunately, Jillian has probably seen right through me from the very beginning. At this point it doesn't matter what I do or say, she's already decided what she thinks I am. And I am mostly to blame for that.

I tip my head toward the still open back door. "You want something to drink?" At least maybe we can find a way to be civil. Maybe I can take this opportunity to convince her I'm not trying to steal her shop, and instead of looking at me with hate she'll casually glance at me with indifference.

Jillian purses her lips, slowly turning toward my hot tub. "I actually had a drink with me."

I lean to peek around her and for the first time notice the handled cup floating across the top of the water. "I'm guessing that was full of something that's going to require me to drain my hot tub."

"Definitely not." Jillian pinches her lower lip between her teeth, cringing a little as she closes her eyes in the first hint of

mortification I've seen from her. "Which is probably why I ended up in your hot tub in the first place."

CHAPTER SEVEN

JILLIAN

I'M A LITTLE surprised Noah hasn't asked why I'm here. Questioned what series of events led to me tumbling over his privacy fence and into the hot tub on the other side.

I would sure as hell be asking him if our situations were reversed, and I'm not sure what that says about either of us. Probably that I'm demanding and he's—

Honestly, I'm not really sure what he is.

Noah moves to the hot tub and fishes out my Stanley cup, twisting the lid off before peering inside. His lips press into an appraising line and his brows lift. "There's still ice in here."

"Those cups are really well insulated." I'm a little too relieved Noah's still not asking about my sudden and splashy appearance into his evening. I'm not sure I could explain them in a way that makes sense, so talking about my favorite cup seems like the safest route to take. "You should get one. They're really nice."

He continues to look over the seafoam green mug as he turns toward the house. "You get this off Amazon?"

"Isn't that where everyone gets everything?" This conversation is bizarre. Almost as wild as the fact that I'm standing in the middle of Noah Hicks' patio, soaking wet, with a bird perched on my shoulder.

Noah turns to glance at me, looking completely different than I've ever seen him before. Calmer. Quieter. More reserved. But maybe that's just the hot tub water residue clinging to the lenses of my glasses.

“Come on in. We can try to bribe Barnaby back onto his stand.”

I’m still a little too tipsy to come up with a better alternative, so I follow Noah inside, immediately shivering at the blast of air conditioning that hits me as I cross the threshold. “Do you have your thermostat set to tundra?”

Noah’s lips twitch, making me think he’s going to smile, but the expression never comes. “I tend to run hot.”

My still inebriated eyeballs drop down to the front of his shorts, directed there by nothing more than his slightly suggestive collection of words.

Or possibly by the fact that Noah Hicks absolutely is hot. I might have tried to deny it before—when I was sober and hadn’t seen him naked—but right now neither of those things are the case so I’m forced to face the reality of it. Regardless of how I feel about him as a person, Noah is frustratingly fantastic to look at.

Which is what I’m still doing. Right at the outline of his strikingly large penis.

He nods to a large wire cage sitting in front of an even larger window overlooking the green expanse of his side yard. “Go stand over there. See if he’ll jump onto his cage.”

Once again, I don’t have a better plan of action, so I follow Noah’s directions and move to Barnaby’s domain, angling the shoulder he’s currently occupying as close as I can to the wire corner. “There you go big guy. Go to your home.” I wiggle my shoulder, hoping it will encourage him to jump, but instead Barnaby seems to think I want him to dance, and he begins to bob up and down to the beat of a song in his head.

“Come on Barn.” Noah’s voice makes me stiffen. Partly because it’s so close, but mostly because it’s deep and soft in a way I’ve never noticed before. “You gotta leave the pretty lady alone, bud. She needs to change out of her wet clothes.” Noah drops a few cut grapes into a bowl clipped to the inside of the cage. Barnaby stretches tall, craning his neck to see what exactly the offering is. He must find it too tempting to resist,

because he immediately launches himself from my shoulder onto the cage, shimmying his way inside the door and over to the snack.

I'm not going to say that I wasn't ready for Barnaby to relocate, but there was something a little exciting about having a bird decide to make me a perch. I reach inside and slide one finger down Barnaby's back in what I hope is the correct way to pet a bird. "Thanks for not taking a shit on me."

Noah presses his lips together, shaking his head as he cringes. "I don't know that I would be thanking him for that just yet."

I turn, spinning a little as I try to get a look at the towel draped around me and I barely catch a peek of a streak of greenish goo stretching down the white terrycloth. "Damn it, Barnaby." I peel the towel off, bundling it around the poo streak so I don't fling it everywhere. "I thought we were cool."

Noah closes the wire door of the large enclosure, latching it in place. "To be fair, he probably wouldn't mind if you shit on him back."

I glance up at Noah, my eyes widening the same second his do, like we're both equally surprised at what he said.

Noah closes his eyes, letting out a little sigh. "I don't know why I said that."

He's clearly embarrassed, and for some reason, one that's probably related to tequila or possibly the fact that I have now seen nearly every inch of what the good Lord gave him, I decide to take pity on him. "So what you're saying is you do *not* want me to shit on your bird."

Somehow my night has come full circle. It started with talk of shit and now it's ending with talk of shit.

Noah's head dips in an almost bashful kind of way. "Yeah. I would probably appreciate it if you didn't shit on my dead grandma's cockatoo."

I roll my eyes to the ceiling. "When you say it like that it sounds so much worse."

I don't feel bad for him. I do *not*. But it's not quite as easy to hate a man who continues to care for the raging, cursing cockatoo his dead grandmother bequeathed him. Even if the damn thing did just shit down my back.

Noah clears his throat, shifting on his feet as his eyes go everywhere but on me. "I'll go get you something dry to change into. He turns and practically runs out of the room, disappearing down the hallway, like he can't get away from me fast enough. Which is a little offensive considering I'm being way more pleasant to him than ever before.

I look around for somewhere to put the towel I'm still carrying. It seems wrong to drop it on his kitchen table or the counters where he prepares his food, so I keep it with me as I move around, trying to find a spot that's slightly less freezing cold. I shiver again, the move pulling my nipples so tight they ache, and I glance down to discover the wet shirt I'm wearing is plastered to my skin and almost completely see-through. I pinch a bit of the fabric between my boobs and pull it away from my body, the soaked cotton making a slight sucking sound as I peel it loose.

Noah rushes back into the room carrying a small stack of warm looking clothes. He holds them out to me, his eyes fixed on a spot just above my head. "Here. The bathroom's back there." He thumbs over one shoulder, still refusing to look me in the eye.

Or maybe it's not my eyes that are the issue. The thought that Noah is attempting to avoid looking at my very obvious nipples threatens to erode a little more of the disdain I've worked so hard to carry for him. And I'm not quite sure how to feel about that.

"Thanks." I snatch away the pile and duck around him, hustling into the bathroom and closing the door behind me. I drop the messy towel to the floor and pile the clothes onto the counter before peeling away my dripping shirt and shorts, each one hitting the tile floor with a slap. I'm just wiggling out of my panties when there's a soft knock at the door.

"Jillian?"

I huff out a little laugh. “You watched me come in here. If someone else is on the other side of this door you’ve got way bigger problems than a little tequila in your hot tub.”

I could swear I hear Noah chuckle through the door. “Point taken. I’ve got a couple towels I threw in the dryer and warmed up in case you wanted them.”

All I have to hear is *dryer* and *warm* and I’m cracking the door open and peeking out. “Are you serious right now?”

Noah holds up the towels as proof. “I only brought two but I can toss in some more if you need them.”

I snake one arm out through the gap, snatching away the warm towels before closing the door. “Two is great,” I call out to him as I wrap one around my hair and the other around my shivering body, moaning a little as the warmth sinks into my skin. “This is amazing. Thank you.”

It would probably be amazing even if I was stone-cold sober, but tipsy Jillian is way more complimentary than non-tipsy Jillian. Tipsy Jillian also has way worse ideas than non-tipsy Jillian, and I’m positive I will be facing the ramifications of those soon. But right now, I’m going to enjoy this moment of being wrapped in a fuzzy, warm towel after being wet and cold. Why is that such a good feeling?

I don’t know, and don’t really have time to ponder it because my hair is going to end up permanently stuck in the matted wad Barnaby styled with his claws if I don’t handle that situation soon. I remove the towel on my head and go to work unwinding the rubber band wrapped around what was once a messy bun, before shaking my chlorinated strands free. When I’ve finger combed out as many tangles as possible, I work it into a quick French braid. Then I grudgingly unwind the warm towel from my body and pull on the sweatpants and T-shirt Noah brought out for me.

They are about three sizes too big for me, but at least the pants have a drawstring, so I pull it tight and roll up the waistband. I tuck in the front of the shirt and call it done. Once I’m finished, I collect all the towels, keeping the bird-shit

towel separate as I go back out into the kitchen/great room area at the back of Noah's very nice house.

Tomorrow I'm probably going to be super pissed off about this. Because now I've actually seen the dream that was nothing more than a vision in my head, and it's so much better than I expected it would be.

Which reminds me that dream is still on the line and brings me back to my whole reason for being here in the first place.

I hold the towels out to Noah. "I want proof that you're not trying to take over my space."

Noah takes the towels, lifting a brow. "Is that why you're here? For proof that I'm not expanding?"

Initially I was here to light some shit on fire on his front porch, but telling him that now seems like it would be counterproductive. "Yes. That is for sure the only reason I am here right now."

"So you came here to nicely ask me for proof that I'm not trying to take your bookstore and ended up falling into my hot top instead?" There's no skepticism in Noah's tone, but there is smug amusement, which is the first hint I've seen tonight of the cocky personality I know he has.

"I fell into your hot tub because I heard someone threatening to kill you. I snuck around the back and climbed up on the retaining wall so I could see what was going on and do something to stop them." I might not be the biggest fan of the guy, but that didn't mean I was going to let someone kill him—

Without me witnessing it.

"So you fell into my hot tub for my own good." He seems even more amused now, and the glow of tequila is starting to wane so it pisses me off.

I shove one finger at the birdcage sitting near the window. "It's Barnaby's fault. He was the one who was calling you a motherfucker and saying he was going to kill you. Take this whole thing up with him."

Barnaby squawks, his birdie face immediately coming my way. *“Mother fucker. I’ll kill you.”*

I lift my brows as he proves my point. “See?”

“What I don’t understand is how you could have possibly heard Barnaby from my front door.” Noah points out one of the many flaws in my story.

But I’m not going to bite. I cross my arms, trying to look tough and not drunk. “Do you have proof, or not?”

Noah shakes his head. “I don’t.”

I lift my chin, hoping it hides the sudden flash of disappointment I don’t want to feel. “That’s what I thought.”

“How in the hell do you expect me to prove I’m not doing something?” He holds his hands out at his sides. “It’s not possible.”

Noah’s inability to produce any sort of evidence to the contrary only makes me more certain he’s guilty. “I saw the way you were looking at my store when you came over last week. You were trying to figure out how many stepmills you could fit in it.”

“I think you’re getting your equipment mixed up.” Noah goes to where he set my cup in the sink, lifting it out to give it a sniff. He dumps the melting remnants of my tequila-heavy Margarita down the drain before rinsing the cup out and tipping it into the drying rack sitting on the counter. “Go talk to Mauricio. He can tell you what’s really going on and then you’ll know I’m not the bad guy here.”

Once again Noah is surprising me by not calling me out for the fact that I carried a forty-ounce cup that might have been mostly filled with alcohol to his house.

But my opinion on him isn’t going to change. It’s just not. “I would love to talk to Mauricio.” I force my lips into a frown. “The problem is he won’t return my phone calls.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing I happen to know he frequently works in his office late at night.” Noah’s eyes drop

to my bare feet. “Did you come all the way here without shoes?”

I wiggle my toes because that’s just what you do when someone stares at them. “No, but it’s not like it’s that far.” I point at the back of his house before realizing that’s not the direction I live. I keep my arm outstretched and my finger pointing as I spin, trying to get my bearings. “I live,” I finally give up when I start to get dizzy, “close.”

“Great news, but where are your shoes?” Noah glances out at his hot tub. “Should I be fishing through the water?”

Pretty sure the rubber flips I had on would be floating if that’s where they were, which means they are probably on the other side of the fence. “They might still be on the wall.”

I follow Noah onto the back patio and wait there as he goes out the gate and around to the wall I scrambled onto in an effort to get a good look at what was happening on the other side of his fence. He comes back less than a minute later carrying my yellow slides. “These belong to you?”

I snatch them away when he comes close. “You know they do.” I drop them to the ground and wiggle my feet in.

“Actually, I don’t know that. As far as you know you’re just one of many women trying to get a peek at my dick while I’m in the hot tub.”

My eyes open wide and my head tips back. “I was *not* trying to get a look at your dick.”

I did sort of touch it by accident though.

And then accidentally stared at it for a minute.

But I was just shocked by its sudden appearance. And its length. And girth.

I stand up as tall as my five-foot one-inch body can go. “And if I did happen to catch a glimpse of it, I can promise you it wouldn’t have impressed me.”

“That’s funny, Jilly-Bean.” Noah takes a step toward me, closing the distance between us in under a heartbeat. “I never pegged you as a liar.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

I'M NOT SURE if it's because we're in my personal space or if it's the fact that, despite what she's claiming, Jillian absolutely stared at my dick for at least five locomotives, but something has changed.

I'm no longer obsessing over every word that comes out of my mouth and I'm no longer focused only on impressing her.

Seeing Jillian in what should be a completely uncomfortable and embarrassing situation makes me feel like the scales are a little more balanced between us.

It also helps that her mouth is hanging open and she's sputtering out shocked sounds over the fact that I called her a liar. For once, I'm the one with sure footing and it feels fucking fantastic. Fantastic enough that I'm not going to be giving it up anytime soon.

"Close your mouth." I use the tip of one finger to press up on her chin. "And let's go talk to Mauricio." I'm ready to clear the air between us. Give Jillian the proof she wants so we can move forward.

And right now I do think we can move forward. If Jillian really hated me the way she acts like she does, she would have been thrilled I was being murdered. Instead she risked her own safety to come save me. I know her simply not wanting me to die shouldn't make me as excited as it does, but I can't help it.

Jillian, in all her frowny, glasses wearing, book reading glory is my freaking dream girl, and I'm not quite ready to throw in the towel on making her mine.

I snag the keys to my Jeep from the counter and go for the garage, expecting her to follow behind me. I open the steel safety door and turn to find Jillian standing in exactly the same spot she was standing in before, still looking completely flabbergasted. “I thought you wanted proof?”

Her spine snaps straight. “I do.”

I use both hands to gesture into the garage. “Then let’s go.”

She stares at me a second longer, scowl snapping back into place. “Fine. Let’s go then.” She stomps past me, her rubber shoes making squishy padded noises against the tile floor.

She storms to the passenger’s side of my Jeep and yanks on the handle, growling in frustration when it doesn’t immediately open.

I step in beside her, pressing the button on my fob before opening her side. “I’ve got it.”

I’m only antagonizing her, I realize this, but I love her attitude. The fierceness she is unwilling to hide. It’s a trait I’ve sought since my very first childhood crush.

Miss Maxwell was the school librarian at my middle school. She was fucking gorgeous with dark hair she always pulled back, heavy glasses and a full mouth my thirteen-year-old brain would barely have known what to do with.

She was also stern and serious and didn’t take any shit from anyone, including the students constantly disrespecting her domain.

One day I was studying at a table and a group of guys in the grade ahead of me started giving me shit. She stepped in and cut them down with a few sharp words, sending them sulking away, tails between their legs.

I was heartbroken when she got married the following year, but decided one day I would find my very own Miss Maxwell.

And I think maybe I have.

Jillian shoots me a frown as she swings one leg up and tries to climb in, but the height of the vehicle is a little more

than she can manage.

I reach in for the inside handle above the window, flipping it down so she can grab onto it.

“No one needs tires this big on a car.” She latches onto the handle and hoists her body up, struggling a little with the maneuver before finally making it into the seat. “People will think you’re overcompensating.”

I give her a smile. “I guess it’s good that you know the truth then.” I close the door right as her eyes widen, grinning at her through the window.

I thought I liked sassy Jillian, but I might like off-balance Jillian even better. It’s brought a new level of outrage and spunk to her already feisty personality.

Which only makes me want to poke at her more.

I easily climb into the driver’s seat and punch the button to open the garage, starting up the engine as the door lifts. I back out into the cooling night air, immediately rolling down the windows. I love feeling the warmth of the sun during the day, but there’s something special about the muggy night breeze. I love the way it hits my skin and cuts through my hair.

Even Jillian seems to enjoy it. She initially sits stiffly with her arms crossed, but slowly starts to unwind, head tipping back as the wind blows around her still damp hair, working a few strands free of the braid she worked it into.

Seeing her wearing my clothes and sitting in my car burrows something foreign into my gut.

I’ve never been a possessive sort of guy. Never got close enough to a woman to warrant it. But right now, every cell in my body wants me to figure out how to make Jillian mine. Figure out a way to make the spot she’s occupying permanent.

And that’s a huge fucking problem.

I’ve always been one to fall too fast. End up too deep. Have way more emotional attachment than any romantic situation I’ve experienced has warranted. My infatuation with Miss Maxwell is a perfect example.

It's part of the reason I work so hard to pretend to be indifferent—pretend I'm barely interested and even less invested—but I'm not sure I'll be able to accomplish that with Jillian after tonight. Now that she's been in my home—in my life—I might be fucked.

I live relatively close to the strip mall I secured space in six months ago, so the drive is shorter than I wish it was and we're pulling into the parking lot sooner than I'd like. Instead of driving to my normal spot in front of the gym, I go around to the back, following the narrow alley that runs behind the building to the corner office Mauricio runs his businesses out of. I park beside one of the dumpsters allotted for the tenants renting space and cut the engine, jumping out and rounding the back to make sure Jillian sticks the dismount.

It's a good thing I'm there because her rubbery shoes don't offer much in the way of traction and her feet slide forward in them, tipping her backward. Like I did when she jumped up from hiding behind the plant, I reach out to steady her, careful to keep my hands in responsible locations. "I suggest wearing more appropriate shoes the next time you come to spy on me."

Jillian smacks at me, swatting my helping hands. "I wasn't spying on you. I told you. I just came to get proof you're a space-stealing asshole."

"So once you have it you'll stop watching me all the time?" It's a baited question and I don't expect her to bite. I know it wasn't just her desire for proof that brought Jillian to my house tonight. It was also a whole lot of whatever alcohol was in the drink that filled the cup I saved from drowning and I need to keep the fact that she's probably still a little tipsy in mind.

But I still can't help but pick at her a little.

"Once I have proof you aren't trying to steal my space I will no longer be pissed at you." She easily sidesteps my question, making me think she might not be quite as inebriated as I thought.

"That is fantastic news." I take her hand in mine and tug in the direction of Mauricio's office, heart racing as I shoot my

shot. I'm not looking a gift horse in the mouth and I'm not letting this opportunity pass by. "Because I would hate for you to glare at me the whole time we're at dinner."

"What are you talking about? We're not going to dinner," Jillian argues with me, but she doesn't pull her hand from mine. I'd like to think it's because she's as affected by the touch as I am, but it's probably because her footwear is not quite suitable for the rough terrain in this part of the parking lot.

"Are you sure?" I step up onto the sidewalk that wraps around the building. "Because I haven't had dinner yet and I'm starving."

Jillian follows me onto the sidewalk and slides her hand from mine the second she hits the concrete, confirming my earlier suspicions. "My clothes are three sizes too big for me and I'm not wearing a bra. There is no way I'm going anywhere right now." Her eyes move to Mauricio's office. "Besides here." Her brows pinch together. "How did you know this was his office? I've rented from him for years and I didn't know this was where Mauricio works."

I'm not sure how to answer that. The fact that Jillian didn't know this information is not a good thing, and definitely doesn't bode well for the future of her bookshop. "I saw him coming out of here one day." It's not the full truth, but I feel bad telling her that I saw him coming out of here because we walked out together after I signed the papers on my lease.

"If I'd have known this was where he was all this time I would've been coming back here and telling him to his face when the roof leaked and when the hot water heater went out."

And now we probably both know why Mauricio didn't tell Jillian where his office was, but I'm not pointing that out either.

There's a single glass-front door leading to the collection of offices and I grip the handle, holding my breath as I pull. If it's locked then I'm back to square one, with Jillian sure she hates me.

And I don't want to go back there.

The door opens, giving me hope that Mauricio might be here. His office is situated in a section of the building that's divided up into a large receiving area and a row of offices. There's normally someone manning the desk in the waiting area, but tonight that chair is empty. I glance at the bank of screens lined across the wall behind the desk. Each displays a different view of the parking lot and the backside of the building.

Jillian lifts her brows. "I guess at least he's keeping an eye on everything. That makes me feel a little better." She looks around the rest of the sterile space, rubbing her arms as she shivers. "He also seems to prefer setting his air-conditioner to tundra."

She's already got goosebumps running down her arms and I don't want her feeling uncomfortable while we do this. Especially if Mauricio confirms her worst fears about her lease.

"I've got a sweatshirt in my car. Wait here while I go grab it." I don't give her time to argue. I've waited my whole life for the opportunity to take care of someone like this, and I'm going to take full advantage. No matter how fleeting the experience may be.

I jog out to my Jeep, reaching into the back seat for the Fit Body Factory sweatshirt I wore a few days ago when there was a little too much chill in the air one morning. I snag it and go back to the building, moving quickly so we can get this over with. I'm just rounding the corner when a series of loud bangs send my stomach dropping.

I was raised in suburbia and went to a private school, but even I recognize that those were gunshots.

I break out into a run and collide with Jillian as she busts through the glass door of Mauricio's space.

She grabs onto me, eyes wide, skin pale. "We've got to get the fuck out of here." She pushes at me, shoving me in the direction of my Jeep. "Go, go, go."

I know I need to do what she's saying. The only logical reaction to gunfire in this particular situation is to run in the opposite direction. But right now Jillian is not prepared at all to run. Her footwear wasn't equipped to handle the parking lot at a walk. The shoes definitely won't handle it at a sprint.

So I do the only thing that makes sense. I scoop her up, hauling Jillian into my arms and against my chest as I take off to where my Jeep is thankfully tucked behind the cover of a dumpster.

I don't bother going to the passenger's side. There's no fucking time. I go straight to the driver's side, jumping in and dragging her along with me. I hit the ignition and throw it into reverse, taking us in the opposite direction of Mauricio's office.

Jillian slides off my lap, sprawling across the console and in the direction of the passenger's seat, her legs still draped across mine as I stare out the back window, pushing the Jeep as fast as I can manage until I clear the building. Then I whip the front around and shift into drive, flooring it. We peel out of the parking lot and onto the main road, tires bouncing over the curb as I take the last turn tighter than I should.

Jillian stares up at me from where she's still stretched across the seats, hands pressed to her pale cheeks, eyes wide with fear.

I reach across, looking for someplace safe to grip and settling on her bicep. "What in the hell just happened?"

She shakes her head, hands still fused to her face. "I don't know. You left and I decided to go try to find Mauricio, but before I made it all the way down the hall I heard men yelling and then somebody was shooting and I just ran."

"Did you see anyone?"

Jillian shakes her head again. "No, but I wasn't really looking. I just ran."

"That's okay." Now that there's a little bit of space between us and possible death, I'm starting to calm down and

work through the steps we probably should have taken. “We need to call 911.”

Jillian nods, the movement of her head continuing as she speaks. “That’s a good idea. We should do that.”

I glance around, realizing I was in such a hurry to show Jillian I’m not the asshole she thinks, I walked out of the house without my cell. “I don’t have my phone.”

She looks down her front, hands still resting on her cheeks. “I obviously don’t have mine either.”

“It’s okay.” I take a calming breath, hoping to slow the racing of my heart. “We’ll go back to my house, make the call, and then go from there.” It sounds like a reasonable plan. One that doesn’t involve taking Jillian back to the scene of a likely crime.

I pull my hand from her arm and rest it on the legs still tangled across my lap, needing the point of contact to help ease the panic still coursing through me. “But you’re okay? You didn’t get hurt?”

“I’m okay.” She looks me over. “Are you okay?”

I nod. “I’m okay.”

I drive us back to my house, completely ignoring the speed limit the whole way. Once we’re parked in the garage with the door closed behind us, I help Jillian wiggle her way back across the console and out the driver’s door. We hurry into the house and I snag my cell from the counter, quickly calling 911. While the line rings, I look Jillian over, making sure she didn’t catch a stray bullet that adrenaline has kept her from noticing. My eyes stall out on her feet. “Where are your shoes?”

She looks down at her bare toes. “They must have fallen off when you picked me up.” Her face crumples. “I really liked those shoes.”

She looks so much smaller than normal without the bluster of bad attitude and I move to where she stands, wrapping one arm around her back and pulling her close as the 911 operator answers my call. I fill her in on the events of the past few

minutes, giving her the address, what we heard, and any other information I have to offer.

“Thank you, sir. I have police en route. You should see them soon.”

“Oh.” I make a face, knowing the fact that we fled the scene of a crime isn’t going to look great. “We actually aren’t still there. Neither one of us had our cell phones on us.”

The dispatcher assures me that’s not a problem and takes down my name and phone number, telling me one of the officers on the scene will likely contact me, before disconnecting the call.

I set the phone on the counter, closing my eyes as I slide my hand up and down Jillian’s back. She shivers against me, tucking her small body closer to mine.

That’s when I realize I never gave her my sweatshirt.

“Let me get you something warmer to wear.” I let her go even though all I want is to keep her close. “Then we’ll figure out what to do next.”

CHAPTER NINE

JILLIAN

THIS IS FUCKING bananas. Absolutely, completely, wackadoo.

Wackadoo enough that I wish Noah would just get back here again and put his arm around me. Pull me close like he did when he was on the phone.

I actually want a man to hold me. That's how fucked up this night has been.

Noah comes back carrying another of the sweatshirts printed with his gym's logo, along with a pair of socks. He tucks the socks under one arm before gathering up the sweatshirt around the neck hole and pulling it over my head, dressing me like I'm a toddler incapable of doing it on my own.

And honestly, right now that's not far off the mark.

I've never even heard a gunshot in real life, let alone a whole bunch of them happening a few feet away from me. It was terrifying enough that I'm grateful I'm not dealing with it on my own, which is yet another unusual emotion for me. Stress normally makes me an even more solitary creature than normal.

I'm also grateful, crazily enough, that Noah was the one with me when it happened.

He didn't question me when I told him to run. Didn't second-guess my demand or attempt to double check my knowledge of the situation. He just grabbed me and took off, blindly believing what I said and whisking me away to safety.

It was the kind of moment I never expected to have—one that fed both the feminist my mother cultivated and my intense love of the romance novels filling my store.

I lace my arms through the sleeves of the sweatshirt that smells fresh and clean and masculine, standing there while Noah rolls up the cuffs.

“Do you think Mauricio’s dead?” I feel terrible even asking, but I think it’s a reasonable conclusion to come to.

People were arguing in our landlord’s office, shots were fired, and no one came running out with me. I feel like that means somebody didn’t get out of that office alive.

“I hope not.” Noah’s eyes meet mine, his expression making it clear he hadn’t thought of the possibility yet. “Was he one of the men you heard yelling?”

That is a great question. One of many I’m not equipped to answer. “I don’t know.” My chin quivers a little. “I think I’m a terrible witness.”

“That’s okay.” Noah grips me around the waist and hefts me up, depositing my butt on the kitchen counter. Then he drops down to one knee, unwinding the pair of socks before sliding one onto my bare foot. “I think it’s the police’s job to figure out what happened. Not yours.” He moves to my second foot but doesn’t immediately pull on the sock.

I lean forward, wiggling my toes the same way I did last time he stared at them. “What’s wrong?” I sprinted out of the building and down the sidewalk, not paying any attention to what I was doing. I could have dragged my toes across the concrete and be left with nothing but nubs for all the attention I paid.

“Nothing’s wrong.” He shrugs, then goes to work pulling on the sock. “You just have cute toes.”

I open my mouth, expecting a snarky comment to come out, but all I say is, “Thanks.”

I want to give Noah a hard time, but for some reason, my brain isn’t fully functioning. Hopefully it’s shock and not the fact that he’s getting harder and harder to hate.

Noah straightens, holding out his hands to help me down off the counter. “Are you hungry?”

I mull it over. “I don’t really think I can eat right now.” I chew on my lower lip, worrying it almost to the point of pain. “Should we go back? See if they’ll tell us what happened?”

Noah shakes his head. “The 911 operator told me they would call if they needed to talk to us. If it really was a shooting, I don’t think it’s a great idea that we go back until everything’s been cleared by the police.”

It makes sense, but not knowing exactly what happened has me feeling uneasy. “I guess I should probably go home then.” I make myself say it even though the thought of being alone right now is terrifying.

“You sure? You can stay here for a little while.” Noah motions toward the large sectional and giant television in the great room area. “We can watch some TV and wait to see if they call.”

I nod, the tightness in my chest brought on at the thought of being alone loosening a little. “That’s a good idea. We should stay together just in case they call.”

I turn and walk straight to the couch, suddenly feeling awkward and unsure of how to proceed. I thought I knew what kind of guy Noah was, but the man I’m with tonight is nothing like that guy. He hasn’t told me once how successful his business is. He’s gotten my name right every time he’s said it. And he’s bent over backwards to make sure I’m comfortable and taken care of.

It feels like I’m caught in a parallel universe of some sort, and it’s weirding me out.

I fall to the cushions, a little surprised at how damn comfortable Noah’s couch is. Maybe that shouldn’t be a surprise at this point since lots about him isn’t exactly the way I thought it was. I wiggle my butt back and snuggle down, curling my knees up to my chest as exhaustion settles around me.

“Here.” Noah comes my way with a large, fluffy blanket and spreads it across me. “Better?”

I pull the edge a little higher, tucking it under my chin. “This is a really nice blanket.” I finger the super soft fabric. “I wouldn’t expect a guy to have something like this.”

Noah lifts his brows, looking a little surprised. “Men like blankets too.” He grabs the remote and flips on the television before sitting down next to me. “Almost as much as we like a good face mask.”

I snort. “I can’t even imagine you in a face mask.”

He leans back, bracketing his face with one hand and giving me a grin. “How do you think I keep this dewy complexion?”

I roll my eyes at him, but I can’t stop myself from smiling back as the warmth of the blanket and his teasing lightens a little of the weight bearing down on me. “Whatever.”

“*Whatever.*” Noah mocks me, his voice whiny and nothing like the way I sound.

I poke one foot out from under the cover and give him a little nudge of a kick. “Don’t make fun of me. I’m having a bad night.”

Noah sobers and his hand comes to rest on my foot, the weight of it warm and solid. “I just wanted to make you smile.” His thumb drags across the sock he put on me so carefully. “You’ve had a rough few days and I don’t like seeing you frown all the time.”

He’s not lying. I thought Mauricio not renewing my lease was the worst thing that could happen to me. I definitely underestimated how bad shit could really get.

But I also think I underestimated something else.

I rest my face against the cushion, the pressure squishing my cheek a little as I look at him. “You really aren’t expanding your gym?”

Noah shakes his head. “I’m really not expanding my gym.” He slouches down, dropping his head back to the sofa and

angling his face toward mine. “I just doubled my space when I moved in beside you. There’s no way I would be close to ready to take on more.”

I feel like I remember him saying something about that one of the times our paths crossed, but honestly I always tuned him out the second he called me Julian.

Which he has not done at all today and that makes me wonder...

“Can I ask you something?”

Noah’s quiet for a minute, but finally tips his head in a nod. “Sure.”

“Did you really not know my name?” It’s the only thing that makes any sense, but even that doesn’t add up. I’m struggling to come to terms with the fact that the same man that warmed towels for me in the dryer and carried me away from gunfire also forgot my name.

Multiple times.

Noah holds my eyes for a second longer before wiping one hand down his face. He takes a deep breath, lifting his gaze to the ceiling. “No. I knew your name.”

His admission hits me like a bucket of cold water, dousing out any warm feelings tequila and fear accidentally made me have for him. I jerk upright. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Noah doesn’t seem surprised by my outburst. If anything he looks like he fully anticipated it. “A lot.”

Noah might not be surprised by me, but right now I’m sure surprised by him. Surprised at how easily he admitted to knowing my name and how miserable he looks at the truth being revealed.

“So you were just pretending that you didn’t know?” I thought he was an arrogant asshole before. Too wrapped up in his own self to worry about anyone else. But now I know that’s not the case.

Noah isn’t an arrogant asshole, he’s just an asshole.

“I wasn’t trying to—” The sound of his cell phone ringing in the kitchen cuts off whatever lame explanation Noah was about to give me, and that’s probably a good thing because right now I’m dangerously close to going back to plan A and lighting some shit on fire.

I kick off the blanket as he goes to grab his phone, leaving it in a pile on the floor as I stalk toward the front door. I thought being alone right now was a terrible idea, but I’m realizing that there is, in fact, a worse option.

“Yeah. We can come there now.”

I stop, tipping my head back to glare at the ceiling. They’ve got to be kidding.

Noah steps into the opening of the hall, his large frame taking up a ridiculous amount of space. “That was the detective looking into the report we made. He wants to know if we can come down to Mauricio’s office.”

“Yeah. I got that.” I spin on my heel and stomp back the way I came, giving Noah a scowl as I pass. “When we’re done there you can take me home.”

I’m such a fucking idiot. Even with everything I know, I could still clearly fall into the same trap my mother did. The same trap Elana did. The same trap countless women find themselves snared by.

I know what men really are. I know what matters to them and what doesn’t. I know that at the end of the day the only thing they really care about is themselves.

It’s why my father left me and my mother when something better came along. It’s why Elana’s husband smacked her around, thinking it would keep her from leaving him. It’s why women of all ages and races come into my store looking for fictional fantasies and mechanical replacements.

Men only care about their own happiness and satisfaction, and Noah is no different.

I go into the garage, swinging my arms as I speed along. This time I manage to hoist myself up into his stupid Jeep and close the door before he even makes it out of the house. I

buckle my belt and cross my arms, keeping my eyes straight ahead as he backs out of the garage and onto the road.

“It’s not what you’re thinking.” Noah’s voice is quiet. Soft.

He’s trying to smooth this over. It’s not going to happen. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

I jerk my chin to the right, staring out the side window. Thankfully, Noah seems to understand I’m serious and stays silent for the rest of the trip. He parks in the same spot as last time, and I immediately slide out, socked feet hitting the asphalt. I probably look ridiculous, showing up sock-footed in clothes that clearly aren’t mine, but I can’t find it in me to care. I just want to get this done and over with so I can go home and go the fuck to bed.

A plainclothes cop with a badge hanging around his neck meets us at the doors. I’m a little surprised when he introduces himself to me first.

“You must be Jillian. I’m Detective Wentz.” He turns to Noah, shaking his hand before moving in the direction of the offices. “Why don’t you two come in and explain to me what you witnessed.”

I follow him in and give him the basics of what happened. Then Noah offers his portion of the story while I stare down the hall, wondering what’s back there.

Probably a dead body. Or two.

Detective Wentz listens to Noah’s story, but as soon as he’s finished his eyes come back to me. “And you’re sure they were gunshots? Could it have maybe been somebody dropping something heavy on the floor? Possibly a door slamming?”

That’s a weird question. “I’m sure they were gunshots.”

Detective Wentz’s lips press into a thin line and he shakes his head. “I believe that’s what you think you heard, but I’m not finding any evidence that there was a shooting here.”

I open my mouth to argue, but Noah beats me to it. “I heard them too. They were definitely gunshots.”

Detective Wentz jerks his chin toward the hall I've been staring down. "Come with me." He leads the way past the offices, gesturing into each one. "Nothing's been disturbed. There's no bullet holes. No sign of a struggle of any kind."

"What about Mauricio, the owner of the building? Did you talk to him?" Noah asks the question that's on the tip of my tongue.

"We were able to get into contact with the building manager who confirmed that the owner is currently out of the country visiting family." Detective Wentz turns back to face us. "He came and did a walk-through and said everything here looks completely normal."

Mauricio has a building manager?

I glance at Noah to see if he's as surprised by this information as I am, but his expression is impossible to read.

"I appreciate you two coming down here and I'll let you know if I find out what that sound you heard was." Detective Wentz shakes his head. "Because at this point I'm pretty positive it wasn't gunshots." He gives us a smile. "Which is good news."

I'm sure it would be if I wasn't *absolutely* positive that noise was definitely gunshots.

I follow Noah back to his Jeep even more irritated than I was when we got here, which I didn't even know was possible.

"I know those were gunshots." I'm too distracted to notice he's opened my door until I'm in the seat.

"I agree, but I'm not sure that arguing about it is the right approach." He closes the door and rounds the front before getting in and starting the engine. "I'll try to call Mauricio again. See if I can get him to call me back."

"That's a great plan except he doesn't return calls when he's in the US. I can't imagine he'll return them when he's not." I respond before I remember I'm not talking to him.

"It's the only thing I can think to do." Noah pulls out of the lot. "If you've got a better idea I'm all ears."

Sure. I'm not stupid enough to fall for his little nice guy act again. So I ignore him, turning to face out my window, planning to remain silent the rest of the drive.

"I don't know where you live."

Ugh.

"Turn here." I point at the road that takes us into my end of the residential area where we both live. I continue giving him clipped directions until we're parked behind my building.

I open my door and slide to the ground, groaning when I see Noah getting out too. "I'm fine."

"That's probably true, but my grandma will haunt my ass if I don't walk you to your door and make sure you get inside safely." He follows me into the building and up the stairs.

I hit the landing on the second floor and gesture in the direction of my door. "I live right there. You can leave now."

Noah reaches out to grab me, his expression sharpening. "Which door is yours?"

I point, glancing at my apartment. "That o—"

The door to my little home is ajar.

Holy shit. I got so distracted by the letter in my purse and the possibility of animal excrement arson that I forgot to grab my keys and lock up my apartment.

Noah moves past me, putting his body between me and the open door. "Stay here."

Yeah. That's not happening.

I creep along behind him as he silently moves toward my apartment, one hand reaching out to bump the door wide. He freezes. "What the fuck?"

I move in at his back, peeking around one shoulder as he stares into the darkened space.

The lights of the hallway illuminate a rectangle across the carpet.

And the yellow slides I lost outside Mauricio's office.

CHAPTER TEN

THIS IS NOT good. It's bad. Very, very bad.

“What in the—” Jillian tries to step out from behind me, forcing me to block her with my arm and shove her back. “I told you to stay over there.”

“And what makes you think you get to tell me what to do?” She tries to come around the other side but I block her there too, this time wrapping my forearm around her back and pinning her against me.

Someone's been in her apartment and there's a chance they could still be there. There is no way I'm letting her storm in, no matter how capable I think she is of handling herself. I'd rather they get me first.

“Let me go.” She shoves at my back, trying to get free.

“Not happening, Jilly Bean.” I reach through the open door, running one hand up the wall in search of a light switch. Thankfully, it's easy to find and I flip it on, lighting up the bulbs of the small ceiling fan situated in the eating area beside her tiny kitchen.

“Oh hell no.” Jillian pushes at me again. “You don't get to call me nicknames Mr. *I knew your name but called you fucking Julian for months just to be a dick.*”

I hate that she thinks I did it to be an asshole, but right now I have more important things to deal with than Jillian's opinion of me.

I hold her tight against me as I creep into her apartment, knowing full well if I let go she will go rogue and put herself in immediate danger. “This would probably be better for both of us if you could shut up.”

“Did you really just tell me to shut up?” She’s still arguing, but at least she’s no longer fighting me. “You’ve got a lot of nerve.”

I make it into the living room, which is open enough to the kitchen that the light from the dining area reaches it. The place looks tidy, so hopefully that means whoever came in here didn’t tear anything up. There’s two doors leading off the space and the first one opens to a bathroom that looks intact. The second one goes to Jillian’s bedroom, and when I flip on the light all my hopes that whoever broke in didn’t tear anything up go down in flames.

Jillian’s hands tighten in my shirt and she inches a little closer, wide eyes peering around my shoulder. “I guess that answers our question about whether or not they were really gunshots.”

Her room is ransacked, drawers dumped out, sheets ripped off the bed, mattress sliced open and pillows shredded. Stuffing is all over the place, covering nearly every surface like piles of clumpy snow. But the mess isn’t the worst of it.

Written on the wall above her bed, in bright red spray paint, is a message.

You shouldn’t have called the cops.

As if the words weren’t ominous enough, they’re punctuated with a bullet hole instead of a period.

My grip on her tightens. “We should call Detective Wentz.”

Jillian points at the wall above her bed. “Did you not read that? Apparently calling the cops is what got us into this mess in the first place.”

Technically, what got us into this mess was Jillian accusing me of trying to take over her bookstore. But it’s also what

landed her here, pressed close to my body, her hands twisted in my shirt, so I'm not going to point that out right now.

"Jillian, someone broke into your house and tore up your bedroom." I motion at the mess of items strewn around the space. "This is exactly the kind of thing you call the police for."

"A shooting is the exact kind of thing you call the police for too, but clearly that was a bad idea." She shakes her head. "I think I should just clean this up and then we move on and pretend like none of this ever happened."

"Absolutely not." I take a step deeper into the room, hoping that if she gets a better look at all the damage done, she'll come to her senses. "This is clearly a threat. They aren't going to pretend you didn't witness whatever happened just because you don't report this." I take another step and my foot hits something oddly shaped, rolling my ankle and making me stumble. I barely manage to stay on my feet as I look down.

I'm not quite sure what I'm looking at, but I can guess. And that guess has my brain going all sorts of places it should not be right now.

"For the love of God." Jillian bends down to snag the hot pink device from the floor. "Stop acting like you've never seen a vibrator before."

"Of course I've seen a vibrator before." I close my eyes, taking a steadying breath against the sight of her small fingers wrapping around the phallus-shaped item. "It was just unexpected."

Possibly even more unexpected than finding her shoes at the door or the message above the bed.

"Why? Because all a woman should need to satisfy her sexual urges is a real penis?" Jillian moves around the room, picking up more similarly shaped things from the floor.

"That's not why." I swallow hard as she tucks the collection of bright colors into the crook of one arm, fighting to keep from imagining all the ways she might have used

them. “I just wasn’t expecting to step on one, that’s all.” My eyes lock onto the pink vibrator. “Hopefully I didn’t break it.”

Jillian snags it free and presses her thumb against a spot on the base. A low hum fills the air as she smirks at me. “It would take a bigger man than you to take this out.”

I clear my throat, still incapable of taking my eyes off that pink item that has no doubt been pressed to the most intimate parts of her body. “That’s good because I’m not sure I would know where to buy you a replacement.”

I’m babbling. My mouth is back to moving all on its own with no input from my mind because my brain is incapable of offering any assistance. All it can do is imagine that pink wand pressed between Jillian’s thighs, its low mechanical hum mingling with any soft sounds she makes as it teases her to a well-deserved climax.

“Of course you don’t know where to buy one of these. Female satisfaction isn’t something men worry about.” There’s bitterness in her tone as she carries her personal items past me and into the bathroom, dropping them into the sink before coming back. “Wouldn’t want to worry your pretty little heads on something as unnecessary as a female orgasm.”

She’s mad, but not at me. Not directly anyway.

“I worry about them.” Worry is definitely the wrong word but *obsess* is not currently in the limited vocabulary my mind is capable of pulling up.

“Right. I’m sure you lay awake at night worrying about the lack of satisfaction womankind suffers from because of men’s inability to see past the tip of their own dick.” Jillian starts scooping up piles of ruined pillow and blanket, dumping them into the center of her mattress. “You don’t have to bullshit me, Noah.” She turns to face me. “It’s not like I was going to give you the opportunity to prove your vast concern anyway.”

For some reason the way she says it pisses me off. Pushes me to reply in a way I normally wouldn’t. “That’s only because you don’t want me to prove you’re wrong.”

Jillian scoffs, standing a little taller. “Big talk from a man who was scared of a vibrator.”

I shake my head at her. “Not scared of it. Surprised to find it on your floor. Two very different things.” I keep my focus on her as I move a little closer, driven by the fact that one of my most frequent fantasies is unfolding right in front of my eyes. “And I’m smart enough to realize that a good vibrator can be a man’s best friend.”

Jillian rolls her eyes like she does when she wants me to know she’s annoyed. “A vibrator isn’t your best friend.” She crosses her arms. “It’s your worst enemy because it shows women how little work men are actually willing to put in when it comes to sex.”

That’s an interesting statement. One that makes me curious. “How does a vibrator do that?”

Jillian smirks. “Because it can accomplish what men have been claiming is impossible.” She steps toward me, lifting her chin. “Easily.”

I think I’m following what she’s trying to say, but if I’m right then Jillian is generalizing a whole hell of a lot. “And what is it accomplishing?”

Her jaw drops like she can’t believe I need to ask. “Getting a woman off.”

That’s where I thought she was going with this. “Getting a woman off isn’t impossible.”

Her smirk holds. “Said like a man with a whole slew of fake orgasms in his past.”

I’d be offended if there was any chance that was possible. “I can promise you no one’s ever faked it with me, Jillian.”

She moves in a little more. “I don’t believe you.”

She’s so close, her body is nearly against mine. It’s a temptation I can’t resist. One that pushes me to be bolder than I’ve ever been. “Make me prove it then.”

She moves in a little more, hands on her hips. “Maybe I should.” Her eyes skim down my front. “But this day has

already been disappointing enough.”

I chuckle and I don't know where the sound comes from. Or the word that comes out of my mouth next. “Chicken.”

Jillian's dark eyes open wide. “Did you just call me a chicken?”

I'm not sure if we're fighting or flirting, but I do know it's making my dick so hard it aches, and I will do anything to keep it going. Even if that means pissing her off. “I did.”

Her lips press together so tight they turn white. “Fine.” She grabs the waistband of the pants I gave her earlier, stretching it out away from her body. “Then put your money where your mouth is.”

My balls immediately pull tight as a whole new fantasy unfolds. “If my mouth is what you want then I'm not going to complain.”

She sucks in a sharp breath as I wrap one arm around her back, hauling her body against mine as I lift her up and drop her down onto the edge of the mattress. She topples backward, off-balance by my unceremonial deposit, and I take full advantage, catching her at the backs of her knees as I drop to the floor. I press my face against the junction of her thighs, giving it a little nip through the thick fabric of my sweatpants as I lift my eyes to hers. “Change your mind?”

Jillian stares at me for a second. Her jaw sets as she pushes up to her elbows on the mess of a mattress. “Nope.”

“Good.” I snag the waistband she rolled up multiple times in an effort to make my pants fit, dragging them down her legs before tossing them to the floor.

I waste no time, immediately covering her heated flesh with my open mouth.

I have waited my whole life for this moment. Spent countless hours imagining it with my dick in my hand.

But none of those fantasies were anything like this.

I grab Jillian's thighs, pulling her closer until the softness of her ass rests against my collarbone and her knees are around

my ears. Her skin is slick and warm under my mouth and I can't stop myself from groaning against it.

I wish I had time to drink all of her in. To notice everything. To take my time. But that's not what this is about. I wanted to prove to Jillian I'm not what she thinks and this is my opportunity to do just that.

I lick up her slit, pressing my tongue between her folds until I find what I'm looking for. It's easy enough to identify and I immediately focus on the hardened nub of flesh, flicking just beside it with my tongue as I use my lips to work the area around it.

Jillian jerks under me, but not like she's pulling away. I grip her hips, growling in frustration because now I've lost the rhythm I initially had.

Her thighs clamp against the sides of my head. "What the fuck, Noah? Did you just growl—"

I find the pace I set before and fall back into it, taking the fact that Jillian can't finish her sentence as a good sign. Her hips start to move with me as one hand comes to grip my hair, pinning me against her.

As if I would suddenly decide I wanted to be anywhere else.

I wanted to prove I was capable, but I think I might have shot myself in the foot. If I drag this out, she'll feel like it's because I'm struggling. But I hate the thought of this being over quickly. There's so much more I want to do to her. So much more I want to prove.

I slide my fingers along her cunt, determined to show her just how very wrong she is. Easing one finger into her body, I curve it toward her belly as I search for the slightly rough spot inside. Even if I couldn't identify it by feel, the way her back arches off the mattress as I drag against it would have made the discovery clear.

"I fucking hate you right now." Her feet jerk against my back as she continues to shamelessly rub against my face. "So, so much."

She might, but I can't find it in me to care. Instead, I time the thrusting of my finger with the flicking of my tongue, reaching up with my free hand to tease one nipple through the sweatshirt she's wearing.

Which is also mine.

Unfortunately, I seem to have found the exact right combination of contact. Jillian's small body curls in on itself and she lets out an unholy sound that threatens to make me come in my pants as her cunt squeezes around my finger in pulses I can almost feel on my cock.

I don't stop what I'm doing, dragging out her orgasm as long as I possibly can, licking her pussy like the greedy man I am until she twists away from me, using the hand in my hair to shove my head back.

She braces a foot against my chest, knocking me back to my ass as I scrub one hand down my face, wiping away the wetness collected on my skin.

Her glare is intense and immediate when it lands on me. "You suck."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHAT IS WRONG with me?

Probably the same as Noah. A lot.

Someone just broke into my apartment, ruined half my shit, left me a doozy of a love letter, and all I was able to think about was whether or not Noah could really get a woman off the way he was claiming.

Spoiler alert. The man is not the liar I thought he was.

I ignore his smug smile as I grab for the pants he peeled off me like he couldn't wait to get his face between my legs. "Stop looking at me like that."

He doesn't listen and continues watching me from the floor as I wrestle my way into the sweats, his dark eyes following my every move. "You need to pack a bag, Jilly Bean." Noah bends one knee and slings his arm across it. "You're not staying here tonight."

I wait until my lower half is covered again before I argue. "Why in the hell wouldn't I stay in my own damn apartment?"

His eyes lift to the spot just above my bed and I slowly turn, the reminder putting a little bit of a damper on my already dwindling post orgasm glow. "Oh. Yeah." I huff out a frustrated breath. "I was trying really hard to forget about that."

"Then I guess it's a good thing I'm not." He points at my closet. "Get some clothes and let's go."

I know staying here is a bad idea, and not just because my bed is destroyed. But I'm pretty sure I know what the alternative he's planning is and I don't think that's any better of an idea. Especially since I basically just dared him to get me off and I'm already wondering if he'll fall for it a second time...

"I'll be fine." I smooth down the loose strands escaping the braid I worked my hair into after falling into Noah's hot tub what felt like days ago. "You can go home. I'm sure—"

"I'm not leaving here without you, Jillian." Noah pushes up from the floor, standing tall and muscley and even more attractive now that I know what his mouth can do. "And I'm sure as hell not trying to sleep in that bed, so you might as well give it up."

I don't want to give in this easily, but damned if he isn't speaking directly to my soul with the bed comment.

I lift my chin, trying to maintain a little of the attitude that keeps most men from even attempting their bullshit with me. "What kind of bed do you have?"

"A big one." He crosses his arms, looking almost intimidating. "You're still not packing."

"I'm considering my options." I match his stance, crossing my own arms. "Are you going to stay on your side of the bed?"

"Not if you ask me nicely not to."

I roll my eyes up toward the ceiling, shaking my head. "You're not selling this very well."

"I don't know." Noah meets my gaze as he licks his lips, offering a reminder I don't need. "I think I offered some pretty decent motivation."

I've had plenty of sex in my life. Sex that I always ensured was enjoyable for me. But since moving to Florida, my physical interactions have become fewer and farther between. I simply don't have time to put in the energy required. So, unfortunately, the thought of having what I just experienced close at hand is more appealing than I will ever admit.

“Gross.” I turn, stalking to my little closet and yanking out the biggest bag I have. “Don’t get any ideas. You’ve already proven your point so there’s no reason for that to ever happen again.” I say it like I mean it, but a horny, neglected little corner of my brain is already coming up with plans of its own. Plans that involve sitting right on Noah’s smug face and demanding he give me more of what I now can’t help but want.

Which is all his freaking fault.

“Then I will keep my hands and my mouth to myself.” Noah leans against the doorway, recrossing his arms as I stuff clothing into my bag, fighting to keep a frown off my face.

I am not disappointed by that. Not at all.

I’m definitely not bummed that I won’t wake up tomorrow morning with Noah’s head between my thighs.

“Good. You should.” I finish packing items into my bag then turn and look over my room, the bite of fear I’ve been ignoring twisting at my belly.

“I really think we need to call the police, Jillian.” Noah’s tone is gentle, but it doesn’t change the fact that he’s wrong.

“And then what will they do?” I turn away from the red lettering painted on my wall and stomp into the bathroom to grab my toiletries. “Go after my store?” I shake my head. “I’m not risking it.” I haul my packed bag from the small room, intending to sling it over my shoulder, but Noah reaches out and takes it from me.

“So you’re just going to ignore this? Pretend it didn’t happen and go on with your life?”

“Yup.” I walk past him, grabbing my laptop and accompanying charger from where they’re tucked out of sight in a basket under the coffee table. “That is exactly what I’m going to do.”

I know it sounds crazy but I have more important things to worry about than this. Like my business. My bills. My future.

And that's probably not all bad. Maybe if my mother had something else to focus on she wouldn't have been as ruined by my father's abandonment.

I clutch the items against my chest as I grab my purse and the keys I should have used to lock my apartment from the table, then shove my feet into the yellow slides still sitting in the middle of the floor. I expect Noah to argue with me, but he remains silent as I pass him and go out into the hall, waiting for him to follow me out before locking the door behind us.

He still doesn't say anything as we load my bags into the back of his Jeep and climb inside. His lips stay sealed as we drive back to his house, the silence bothering me more than I expected.

"I just don't want them to destroy my shop." I don't know why I'm explaining this to him. It's none of his business.

"But you aren't upset that they destroyed your apartment?" Noah's tone isn't accusatory which is odd to me.

And it keeps me from going on the offense like I normally would. "Not like I would be if they did something to my shop."

Noah's eyes stay out the windshield, but his jaw sets. "I get that." He drapes one hand across the wheel in a move that pulls my attention to the well-defined muscles of his forearm. "Maybe you should look into putting up some security cameras. Just in case."

I snort even though it's not a bad idea. The problem isn't the idea. It's the execution. "I'll get right on that with all my extra money."

Noah falls silent again, his eyes set on the road in front of us as we make the short trip from my place to his. Once we're parked in the garage, he grabs my things from the back and carries them in while Barnaby squawks at us from inside his large cage.

As soon as everything is inside, the events of the evening hit me like a ton of bricks. I'm freaking exhausted. Not just because it's nearly three in the morning, but because I'm

fucking tired. Tired of always having to fight for what I want. Tired of the roadblocks that always seem to stand in my way.

“Come on.” Noah rests one hand against my lower back, directing me toward the hall that branches off of the great room at the back of the house.

I don't bother arguing and let him push me along. All the fight seems to have drained out of me and right now I just want to sleep.

He directs me into a room, flipping on the light. “Lay down. I'll bring your stuff in.”

I'm definitely not going to argue with that. I go to the side of the king-sized bed and pull back the high-end comforter and sheets, kicking off the slides that started this whole shit show of a night before climbing onto the mattress and curling up. The pillows are ridiculously soft and the sheets are insanely smooth, making it impossible to stay awake, and I pass out immediately.

I OPEN MY eyes and look around, not because I've forgotten where I am—I'm pretty sure there's no way that would be possible—but because I need to orient myself. I don't remember a whole lot about Noah's room because I was pretty much a zombie by the time I got here.

I roll my eyes to the side, but the blankets next to me are pretty much undisturbed, making me wonder if Noah ever ended up in the bed at all.

Why does that disappoint me?

I sit up, digging the fingers of one hand into the destroyed braid still containing a little of my hair. I never washed the chlorine from the hot tub out and I can feel the residue on my scalp. I snag the tail end and pull it under my nose, sniffing a little to confirm my suspicions.

I need a shower, but not just because of the chlorine. Hot water and good smelling body wash always adjust my attitude.

As much as my attitude can ever be adjusted.

I grab the bag of toiletries I packed and carry it through the open doorway revealing a glimpse of a sink and shower. I turn on the light and start the water, looking over the room as I work my hair loose.

What I've seen of Noah's house is pretty impressive, so the fact that his master bathroom is really nice doesn't surprise me. Neither does the fact that it's impeccably clean. I got a pretty good look at Noah's body, and even though I was wearing tequila goggles at the time, I'm confident his physique is impressively maintained. It only makes sense that he would take an equal amount of care with his house.

I peel off the sweatshirt and sweatpants that belong to him, dropping them into a pile before stepping around the glass shield partitioning off the shower. As I hoped, the water is hot enough to cleanse not just my body but a little of my soul, and by the time I'm scrubbed clean I'm feeling a little more capable of handling everything than I did last night.

I wrap one towel around my hair and another around my body, smearing moisturizer across my face and down my neck before going out into the bedroom to find Noah standing at the foot of the bed.

His dark eyes rake down my towel-clad body, looking me over with a heated gaze that pulls all my attention to his mouth.

Stupid fucking thing hijacks my brain almost immediately, dragging it to last night and the challenge I never thought he'd be able to take on, let alone conquer.

“Do you want something to eat?”

His question is a little too well-timed and my skin starts to heat instantly. I'm just not sure if it's from embarrassment or something else.

“I guess.” I widen my eyes, forcing them back to his. “Are you eating?”

His nostrils flare the tiniest bit and his expression changes, turning intense in a way that makes my thighs press together.

“I planned on it.”

“That’s good.” Why do I sound so fucking breathless? So needy?

Probably because I am. Up until last night I hadn’t been touched intimately by a man in...

Years.

And I’m not sure I’ve ever been touched by one quite as eager and sure of their abilities as Noah. I can’t help but wonder just what else he’s capable of.

Noah comes closer, his eyes locked onto me. “Is something wrong, Jilly Bean?”

“No.” That word comes out just as whispery as the last ones. “Nothing’s wrong.”

Nothing except the ache forming between my legs.

He stops a little too close, his broad body nearly touching mine. “You sure? Yesterday was rough. Maybe you should take a day to—”

I accidentally lose my grip on the towel wrapped around my body and it falls to the floor. I watch Noah’s face to see his reaction. “Oops.”

His whole body goes still as he stares down at me. “What are you doing, Jillian?”

“I dropped my towel.” I try to sound innocent. “Could you pick it up for me?”

I’m used to coming on to men. I prefer to be the one behind the wheel in any interaction we have because I want to be sure the car I’m driving crosses the finish line. Honestly, I don’t trust men to see to my sexual satisfaction.

Or anything else for that matter.

Noah studies my face a second longer before dropping to his knees in front of me. Unfortunately, he’s way taller than I am so the move puts his face level with my belly button instead of the lower location I want him to pay attention to. His eyes stay on mine as he picks up the fluffy towel piled at

my feet and holds it up, lifting one brow in question. “Anything else I can do for you, Jillian?”

I know chances are good that he’s expecting our next interaction to involve sex and I’m not super mad about it, which is a testament to how much the past twelve hours have fucked me up.

If you’d asked me a few days ago if I would have ever considered having sex with Noah Hicks I would have laughed in your face.

Hell, if you’d asked me yesterday after falling in his hot tub if I would have considered it, I still would have laughed. Men with big dicks tend to be the worst in bed, and that’s saying something since all men leave a lot to be desired in the sack.

By all accounts, Noah should be the most terrible lover ever. He’s great looking with dark hair, dimples and an amazing body. Tack on a big dick and he’s got the trifecta of indicators that flag him as a selfish bedmate. But then he had to go and take my dare, proving me wrong. And now I’m curious to see what else I might have been wrong about.

“Are you offering your services again?” My whole body is already aching and my pulse is pounding, a beat I can feel all the way down to my lady bits.

Noah drops the towel, skimming his hand down the outside of my thigh as his eyes hold mine. “I will service you any time you want, Jillian.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“THAT’S A PRETTY wide-open offer you’re making there, big guy.” Jillian stands in front of me, looking completely unbothered by her nudity. “I might march next door to your gym in the middle of the day and demand you give me what I want.”

I’m sure I’m not that fucking lucky, but if I am, there’s not a thing in this world that would stop me from propping her ass on my desk and licking her until she chants my name.

But I don’t say that to her because it seems a little presumptuous on my part to assume we’re at a point where I can talk to her like that. Not that I would know what that point might look like.

“I guess it’s good we work next door to each other then.” I run the tips of my fingers up the soft skin of her thighs, savoring this moment more than I could last night.

Last night was about showing Jillian she was wrong and showing myself that I’m better than I used to be. That I’ve grown and I won’t repeat the mistakes of my past.

Today is about something else. Today is about relishing that victory. That accomplishment.

But I can’t resist the temptation of her body and the sounds I know I can pull from her. I lean in, sliding my tongue along her seam, pushing between her labia to tease against the side of her clit. I’m careful not to rub directly against it because everything I’ve read made it clear that too much contact overwhelms the dense bundle of nerves located there.

Jillian sucks in a breath, her upper body curving forward a little as one hand fists in my hair, holding tight. “How in the hell do you find that so fast?”

I work one arm between her legs, wedging my shoulder against her inner thigh as I wrap my forearm up her back and spread my palm across her skin. “It’s front and center, Jilly Bean. It’s kinda hard to miss.” I wrap my other arm around her leg, holding tight as I push up from the floor.

Jillian’s hand tightens in my hair and she lets out a little yelp. “What are you doing?”

I step to the side of the bed and lower her down, bracing one knee against the mattress as I lay her up the middle of my mattress. “I want room to work.” I crawl onto the foot of the bed, gripping her thighs and spreading them wide.

Jillian gapes at me as I lean down, putting my mouth back on the soft slickness of her cunt, unable to stifle a groan at the contact. This act is everything I imagined it would be. Maybe more.

Most guys can’t wait to fuck. Every bit of sexual focus they possess from puberty on goes to thinking about shoving their dicks into a vagina and rutting until they get off.

I never had that same focus. It probably goes back to my deep desire to spread happiness, but the sexual act that starred in nearly every teenage fantasy I had was this. And so far it’s living up to every expectation I had.

I lap at Jillian’s hardened nub, chasing those same sounds she made last night. I want to hear them again. I want to feel her thighs lock me in place, forcing me to wring every last bit of pleasure from her I can.

“Fucking hell, Noah.” Jillian starts to squirm, but not away from the probe of my tongue. Like last night, it just seems to be that she can’t quite hold still. It’s great for my ego, but not so good for my rhythm, and, based on my research, pacing is another important part of this act. So, like last night, I grip her hips, pinning them in place as I use the flat of my tongue to

drag over her, the width of it providing a less direct contact than flicking it with the tip would.

Jillian immediately groans, rewarding my efforts, the sound feral enough to make me groan in return.

My dick has been hard from the second she walked out in that towel, but now it's so rigid it's almost painful and the only relief seems to come when I grind against the mattress.

So that's what I do. I rock into the softness of my bed as I slide a finger into her body, searching around for the spot I wasn't sure I'd be able to find yesterday. But, like yesterday, the little rough patch of softness is easily identifiable and I make sure every thrust of my finger rubs against it as I work my tongue and hand in tandem.

Jillian starts to pant, her thighs already shaking as she fights the hold I have on her hip. "You're going to fucking ruin me, Noah. If you do, I swear to God I'll murder you."

I do want to ruin her. I'm not sure I can pretend I don't. I want to be the best she's ever had.

That's the same goal I chase in every aspect of my life. And it's the same pressure that's ruined every sexual experience I've had up to this point, leaving me flaccid and embarrassed.

I like being the best at everything I do. To the point that I nearly killed myself during my time in college and corporate America, putting in long hours and focusing only on coming out on top.

That drive carries over into every other aspect of my life and made it impossible for me to go through the same fumbling sexual experiences every other man I know has had.

That's why I'm where I am. Nearly thirty and, for all intents and purposes, practically a virgin.

I've been inside a woman or two, but each of those times I struggled to stay hard when they clearly weren't enjoying the ride, resulting in short, anticlimactic couplings that most people wouldn't consider actual sex.

But Jillian does seem to like what I do, and it's putting me in a position I've never been in before. One that is taking every bit of focus I have to keep my control.

Jillian's other hand comes to my head, gripping it tight as she starts to chant. "Don't stop. Don't stop. Don't stop." Her pleasure feeds my own, and when her body squeezes around my fingers I can't do anything to keep myself from coming right along with her.

I foolishly expected today to continue on just like last night had, but I didn't consider that one successful encounter might bolster my confidence enough to make a difference. A difference that is quickly becoming apparent.

I unlace her legs from where they're tangled around my shoulders and jump to my feet, intending to get out of the room as fast as I possibly can, hoping to hide my unfortunate reaction from Jillian and spare myself the embarrassment I know will set me back. Push me into the fear that's kept me stagnant for so long.

But when Jillian's dark eyes fall to the front of my grey jersey shorts, I realize it's too late.

"Noah?" Her voice is soft.

I lift my eyes to the ceiling as heat creeps across my face and down my neck. "What?"

I hear her shift around on the bed but can't make myself look at her. "Did you..." Her voice trails off and she clears her throat. "Did you come?"

I blow out a breath, squeezing my eyes closed. "Yeah."

"Really?" She inches closer. "Why?"

I'm surprised at the lack of judgment in her tone. Surprised enough that I accidentally look at her.

The sight of her naked, spread across my bed, staring at the mess soaking into the front of my pants has me conflicted. I've wanted her right here since I first saw her, knowing damn well it would never happen. But now that it has, I'm reminded there are worse things than celibacy. "I, uh." I swallow before

forcing myself to continue. “I like knowing you’re having a good time.”

It’s what’s gotten me into trouble any time I’ve managed to find myself in bed with a woman. If she’s not into it then I’m not into it. If I’m not into it then I can’t...

Perform.

Jillian presses her lips together, eyes still locked on the damp spot of rapidly cooling jizz sticking to my skin. “That’s kinda hot.”

I blink, sure I didn’t hear her right. “Hot?”

“I just—” She bites her lower lip, cutting off what she was going to say.

But I want to hear it. I need an explanation. “You just, what?”

She drags her eyes to mine but they only stay a second before going back to my shorts. “I just didn’t think that was a thing.”

“It’s definitely a thing.” One I can guess is more prevalent than most people realize since it’s not the kind of thing men talk about. Including me. “I’m going to change.” I turn and haul ass out of the room, going straight to the laundry room and closing myself in.

I can’t believe I did that. I was doing so fucking well. I’d almost convinced myself that I was finally figuring shit out. That I might finally be on the road to having all the things I’ve waited so long for.

And then I had to go and come in my pants like a teenager. I can’t think of a better way to display my inexperience. Now she’s going to think I can’t control myself. That I can’t—

“Noah?” Jillian taps on the door, but instead of waiting for me to answer she opens it and peeks through the crack at me. She bites her lower lip, eyes moving over my shoulders and chest before coming back to rest on my mouth. “I wasn’t sure if you had any shorts in here so I brought you some.” She

holds up a pair almost identical to the ruined ones I'm wearing.

"Thanks." I can't meet her eyes as I grab the bundle of fabric from her hand and yank it through the gap.

She stands there a second longer before giving me a little smile. One that is sweet and soft and very un-Jillian like. "You're welcome." She presses down the smile into a much more familiar frown. "You should hurry. I need to get to work."

The door clicks closed and I let my head fall forward to rest against it, taking a couple deep breaths before peeling off my shorts and underwear and tossing them into the washer. I grab a towel from the dryer and wipe the remaining mess off my half-hard dick before adding the towel to the washer and setting it to run. I snag the shorts Jillian brought me from where I dropped them onto the top of the dryer and notice she brought both shorts and underwear. I pull them both on, take another deep breath and open the door, going out into the kitchen to find Jillian bent at the waist as she watches a stream of frothy coffee pour into a cup.

She glances at me before refocusing on the coffee. "You didn't tell me you had a Nespresso machine."

She's being awfully casual and it makes me even more uneasy. "Should I have?"

"Probably not." Jillian snags the cup the second the machine is finished and lifts it under her nose. "I might have fallen into your hot tub sooner." She takes a sip, eyes rolling closed as she swallows. "Holy shit that's good." She takes another drink, leaning back against the counter. "I didn't know how you took your coffee so I figured I would start with mine."

I'm still not sure how to take her oddly unbothered reaction to what happened, but we do need to get moving. "You're probably going to judge me for the way I drink my coffee."

Jillian's eyes focus on me as I open the fridge. "I wouldn't judge you for that, Noah."

I pull out a container of the protein drink I mix with my morning shot of caffeine and set it on the counter. "I guess that's good to know."

"And you never know," she takes another sip, "I might like the fact that you take your coffee that way."

We're not really talking about coffee, and the separation makes the conversation a little easier to navigate. Adds some space I desperately need. "I'm not sure why you would like it that way."

"Maybe I like knowing you want me to like my coffee." Her lips press together. "That doesn't usually happen."

I set a cup under the Nespresso machine and load in my pod before setting it to run. "That's unfortunate."

She sighs. "It really is."

Jillian falls silent and I load up my insulated travel cup with ice before pouring in the chocolate protein shake and topping it off with the double shot of espresso I brewed. Jillian watches me with an interested gaze and after I screw on the cap I hold it out to her. "Want to try it? See if you like how I take my coffee?"

Her lips twist into a little smirk. "I definitely like how you take your coffee." She snags away the cup. "But I'll taste it anyway." She sucks down a swallow through the straw, eyes widening. "Holy crap. That's actually really good."

I grab her Stanley cup from where it still sits in the drain rack. "Want me to make you one for the road?"

She nods. "I definitely do."

I mix up Jillian's drink and throw a few protein bars into my bag. Then we load into my Jeep and head to the strip mall, making it there just as one of my clients pulls up in his work truck. I give him a nod in greeting as I slide out.

Blake gives me a wide grin. "You have good timing."

“Not really.” I hurry around to Jillian’s side of the Jeep, holding one hand out as she slides free, the move hiking up the skirt of the summery dress she’s wearing. “I planned to be here before you.” My eyes accidentally meet hers. “But something important came up.”

Jillian’s hand tightens in mine and her skin flushes, pinking up in a way that surprises me. A way that could be from embarrassment.

Or excitement. Unfortunately, I’m not sure which one it is.

And right now it doesn’t matter. Right now I need to focus. I have a lot to accomplish today and my most important task starts now.

I hold one hand out toward the man who started his day early as a favor to me. “Jillian, this is my friend Blake.”

Blake gives her a wave as he unloads the items I asked him to bring from the back of his truck.

I brace myself, knowing there’s a chance what I say next could undo all the progress we’ve made.

But I’m not risking Jillian’s safety for my own gain.

“He’s installing security cameras in your shop.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JILLIAN

ELANA STANDS BEHIND the counter, watching as Blake works. She leans close to me, keeping her voice low. “Are we mad about this?”

That is an extremely good question. One I’m not currently prepared to answer. “I don’t fucking know.”

Spicy Stacks is *my* business. I worked hard to make it happen and even harder to keep it afloat. I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished, and the fact that Noah just took over and arranged for someone I don’t know to come in and do something that involves my business should grate on my nerves.

But I’m struggling to make myself mad about it.

I drop down onto the stool behind the register, crossing my arms as I try to scrounge up a glare, but it’s just not working. All the piss and vinegar seems to have bled right out of me. And I’m not sure if that’s linked to what happened at Mauricio’s office or what happened between my thighs.

Twice.

Elana watches Blake a second longer before bringing her eyes to my face. “And why exactly is he doing this?”

I haven’t told Elana about what happened here last night. Partly because I don’t want to remember and partly because I don’t want to risk dragging her into it. She has enough problems of her own and definitely doesn’t deserve to have mine added to the pile. “I think he just wants to be sure his

business is safe and since mine is adjacent it makes sense to have cameras in here too.”

That sounds plausible. Almost.

Elana nods, looking unconvinced. “And who exactly will have access to these camera feeds?”

A flutter of the anger I’ve been trying to find all morning wiggles through my belly. I stand up, a little too happy to finally have something to be mad about. “That’s a good freaking question.” I stomp around the counter, flip-flops smacking against the tile. “I’m going to go find out.”

I storm down the sidewalk, pumping my arms to make myself look as aggressive as possible as I pass the line of windows facing out of Noah’s gym. I yank open the door and rush inside, scanning the space for any sign of the man I’m working hard to shove back into the box I’ve carried my whole life.

But the second my eyes land on Noah, the anger in my belly flutters around, acting more like excitement.

“Hey.” He gives me a cautious smile, slowly coming my way. “I was just coming to see you.” He lifts up the paper bag in his hands. “I got us lunch.”

I’m not sure which part of that trips me up the most. The fact that he was coming to see me or that he got me lunch. But I can’t get distracted. I came here for a reason and I need to stick to that plan. Just like I need to figure out how to cram Noah back in that goddamn box he won’t seem to stay inside.

“Who gets to see what’s on the cameras?”

His dark brows barely lift. “You do. Didn’t Blake show you how to download the app?” He comes closer, concern pinching his brow. “You’ll set a password and then you can access them whenever you want. I can show you how to do it if he’s already finished and gone.”

The tiny bit of standoffishness I managed to scrounge up fizzles. “Will you have access too?”

Noah shakes his head. “Not unless you give it to me.”

Well, fuck. Looks like I won't be duct taping him back into that box today after all.

I press my lips together as an amazing and familiar scent reaches my nose. "What did you get for lunch?"

Noah hesitates. "I want you to keep an open mind."

I drop my head back because I know exactly what he's going to say. "Is that from Lalibela?"

Noah's head bobs back in surprise. "You know Lalibela?"

"Of course I know Lalibela." I steal away the bag, unrolling the top and peeking inside. "I just can't believe *you* know Lalibela."

Noah was supposed to eat nothing but protein powder and chicken breasts. Maybe the occasional broccoli floret. He was not supposed to be familiar with my most favorite Ethiopian restaurant in all of Sweet Side.

Just like he was not supposed to be capable of getting me off.

I groan, the sound built of frustration and helplessness. I know what to do with men who fit the parameters I set for them. I know what to expect. How to treat them. I don't know what to do with Noah and it's making me a little crazy.

He thumbs over one shoulder. "Do you want to eat in my office since we're already over here?"

I glance toward my bookstore. "I'm not sure about leaving Elana. She might not be comfortable being there alone with Blake."

Noah's expression sobers, his jaw flexing the tiniest bit. "Okay. Let's eat next-door." He grabs my hand and immediately pulls me to the exit, leading me back to my shop without question or hesitation.

But it quickly becomes apparent my concerns were not warranted. Elana is smiling from ear-to-ear as she chats with Blake, going about her tasks as he mounts a camera in the backmost corner of the store.

Noah barely pauses to nod a greeting at Blake as he all but drags me into the break room, closing the door most of the way before pulling out a chair.

I set the bag on the table and drop into the chair he offers while Noah goes to work unloading the items in the bag, setting out containers of ye siga wot and mesir wet, along with shiro and ye doro tibs.

“You got a little bit of everything.” The collection of sauced beef, cooked lentils, chickpea mash, and chicken with onions and red pepper already has my mouth watering.

“I didn’t know what you might like so I tried to cover all my bases.” Noah sets out the stack of injera between us. “I wanted to be sure you ate well today since you didn’t eat last night.”

“I’m starting to feel like our relationship is becoming very one-sided.” I have to point it out. I don’t like feeling indebted to other people, and it’s quickly becoming clear that I’m going to be indebted to Noah. In lots of different ways.

Noah settles into the seat across from me, his expression cautious. “Would it help if I admit that I’m trying to butter you up for something?”

There it is. I knew this was coming. Knew sooner or later there would be talk about the lack of penetration between us. About how he’s earned the right to my body.

“Of course you are.” I snatch away the container of shiro, pulling it close enough he can’t get any of my favorite dish. “And what exactly is it you want from me, Noah?” The anger I struggled to find earlier flares and it feels good to be back to myself.

“We have to tell the police about your apartment.” He leans forward, resting one arm against the table. “Now that the bookstore has twenty-four-hour surveillance I want you to make that call.”

That knocks the wind right out of my bitchy sails, stalling my retreat from the treacherously unknown waters Noah has dragged me into. “That’s what you want?”

There's got to be more. Please God let there be more.

His lips barely quirk in a small smile that makes my heart skip a beat. "No. That's not all I want."

Here it is. Here's what I've been waiting for.

I wish the feeling in my stomach was because I can't wait to finally be back to my normal, cynical self, but it's not. The deep pang twisting my insides is from something else. Something I never planned to feel.

Interest.

Genuine, honest to goodness interest in a man. Excitement about what's happening between us. Warmth at the way he's treating me.

Noah leans close, his eyes holding mine. "I want you to share that shiro." He snags the Styrofoam container away, pulling it to his side of the table as I scoff.

"You greedy man." I grab a fork from the counter, fisting it in my hand as I jab his direction in a mock threat. "I will fight you for that. It is my most favorite thing to eat in the whole world."

Noah's gaze heats, smoldering with an intensity that coils in my belly. "I guess I can let you have your favorite thing to eat since you let me have mine." He shoves the shiro back my way, relaxing in his seat without looking away from my face.

Which I know is currently red as hell.

I'm not embarrassed by this conversation. I love talking about sex and everything that goes with it. Hell, I was really hoping Noah would want to discuss the fact that he came while going down on me.

That conversation would have been extremely enlightening and probably exceptionally arousing, especially since just the thought of what happened has my skin flaming hotter with each passing second.

I've gone my whole life knowing men didn't give a shit about pleasing women in bed. Knowing men were only out for themselves and their own needs. But now I'm faced with the

fact that Elana might have been right when she said *not all men*.

And it is really sticking in my craw.

I snatch away the food, dropping the fork so I can grab an injera and use it to collect a bite of the spicy chickpea paste.

Noah doesn't make any move to eat, just watches me. "What do you think?"

I pop the combination of bread and bean into my mouth. "What do I think about what?"

"Calling the cops." He crosses his arms. "We can't just let that go."

It's odd to hear someone say *we* in a way that includes me. I've never been part of a *we*. When I was young it was *us*. Me and my mom against a world full of men just waiting to screw us over. My mom did her best I think, but everything she taught me was colored by an experience I maybe shouldn't have been part of.

It's something I didn't think too much about until recently, when I saw how Elana sheltered Bella from as much of what happened as she possibly could. Bella was able to remain happy and mostly unaffected instead of angry and hurt, crushed by a very adult reality.

"Fine." I scoop out another bite of food. "But if they come back and destroy my apartment it's going to be all your fault."

Noah stretches his legs out in front of him, sliding them on either side of mine. "If they come back to destroy your apartment then we'll have evidence of who's responsible because Blake's going there when he's done here."

I nearly choke on my fantastic food, struggling a little as I try to swallow it. "I don't need you to install cameras in my apartment."

"I know that." Noah finally focuses on the food, tearing off a piece of the flat, fermented injera bread before pinching it around a scoop of ye siga wot. "But this involves me too. And if they realized you were there last night, they'll figure out I

was there soon enough.” He shoves the bite in his mouth, pushing it into his cheek before continuing. “It’s in my best interest to catch who did this and getting them on camera at your apartment is probably our best bet.”

Well, when he puts it that way it almost makes sense. I still don’t like it, but I can understand his desire for this whole situation to be resolved. I want it to be resolved too. I want to go back to my normal life in my own apartment, running my bookstore.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem like I’ll be able to go back to hating Noah.

“Fine.” I take another bite, hating that he loves Ethiopian food so I can at least hate something. “We can call the police and you can put in cameras.” I point at his face. “But as soon as all of this is done the cameras come back out.” I swing my finger around, gesturing at the shop. “All of them.”

Noah tips his head in agreement. “Fair enough.”

Good. That’s fine. I might not be able to stomp Noah back into that original box, but maybe I can make a new one. One that he *will* fit in. One that I can tape closed when this is over and pack away in an unnoticeable spot. I’m willing to consider that maybe Noah isn’t as bad as I originally thought, but I’m not interested in changing my life plans because of that.

We finish eating lunch and Noah goes back next door. The rest of the afternoon flies by. Elana wrangles most of the customers while Blake shows me how to handle the cameras. I have to say it’s a pretty nifty set up. I can access them from anywhere just by opening the app on my phone. Now I’ll be able to check in on the store all the time, day or night, making sure everything is as it should be.

The convenience of it kinda makes me consider figuring out a way to budget the fees into my bill schedule.

Noah appears as Elana and I are wrapping up for the day, bag slung over one shoulder, ready to take me home. He peruses the shelves, looking over the spines of the paperbacks and hardbound novels that I’m sure he’s mocking in his head.

Or I would be if I didn't already know Noah a little better.

I'm finishing up balancing the register when he pokes his head out from one end of the bookshelf. "No Shakespeare?"

I lift one brow at him. "Shakespeare isn't super popular with my demographic." I pack up the day's cash, which is decent since while most of my customer base may not be interested in Shakespeare, they do generally carry cash. "They prefer romance novels and beachy women's fiction." I consider the explanation a minute before amending. "And the occasional domestic thriller."

Noah leans back to look down the aisle again. "You say you carry romance but I notice there's no Nicholas Sparks."

I can't help the strangled sound I make. "Nicholas Sparks does not write romance." I probably feel a little too passionate about this topic, but I can't help it. "Romance has a happy ending." I yank my purse out from under the counter. "Nicholas Sparks murders heroes. He writes women's fiction."

Noah lifts one brow. "But you said you carry women's fiction."

Elana leans back, trying to get out of my line of sight, but I catch her violently shaking her head and making a slicing motion across her throat out of the corner of my eye.

"Fuck Nicholas Sparks." I yank my keys free of my purse and march to the door. "He can kiss my happily-ever-after-loving ass."

I swear I hear Noah chuckle behind my back, but I don't turn around to look because I don't need to see anything else that might make me want to like him any more.

It's getting hard enough not to like him as it is.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JILLIAN'S APARTMENT LOOKS worse than I remember.

Maybe it was the dark or maybe it was the dare she laid at my feet, but something must have kept the extent of the damage from registering last night.

I don't have that problem today.

The mess in her bedroom is fucking insane. Most of her bedding is completely ruined, along with the mattress and pillows. Even the chair tucked into one corner has been destroyed, the fabric sliced open so its innards could be yanked out and thrown everywhere. The place is an absolute mess, but the worst part is still the warning painted on the wall.

I frown at it as I turn to Detective Wentz. "See what I mean?"

I did my best to explain what we found to him over the phone, but I'm pretty sure I didn't do it justice. Unfortunately, the detective doesn't look as startled as I anticipated, and that bothers me.

"We see this kind of thing all the time." He pulls a notepad from one pocket, flipping it open as he gives the room a quick scan. "Usually it's an ex-boyfriend that's pissed off over a breakup."

Jillian cocks her head at him, crossing her arms. "That would be a great theory if I had an ex."

I try to hide my surprise, but my eyes still jump to Jillian. I know she's not the warmest woman in the world, but that's part of her charm. Part of what makes her so fucking irresistible. I can't be the only man ready to do whatever it takes to wipe that frown off her face.

Detective Wentz shakes his head. "It doesn't have to be an ex. It can just be someone you dated. Maybe a guy you talked with a little bit on Tinder."

Jillian lifts a brow and her lip curls. "Do I look like I go on Tinder?"

Detective Wentz looks her up and down. "I don't know that the patrons of Tinder have a look." He refocuses on his notepad. "At least not that I've noticed."

So Detective Wentz must spend a little time Tindering. At least we're learning something tonight, because it's starting to look like we might end up in the same spot we did last night.

Being told the crime we're reporting isn't really a big deal.

"It's not an ex. It's not someone I dated. It's not some guy from Tinder. None of that applies to me." Jillian stands a little taller. "This is connected to what happened last night at the strip mall. It has to be."

Detective Wentz slowly brings his eyes from the notepad to level them on the spot where Jillian stands. "I would be inclined to agree with you if something actually happened at the strip mall." He shakes his head. "But there's no evidence indicating anything happened there."

Jillian's nostrils flare and I can almost see her body temperature rising. I quickly step between them. "I think we can all agree that something did definitely happen *here*." I try to run interference because I really don't feel like bailing Jillian out of jail tonight. "So how about we focus on that for now." I keep my gaze on Jillian, willing her not to continue arguing with Detective Wentz.

I agree with her—something definitely happened at the strip mall last night—but if we keep pushing the envelope they're going to start wondering exactly how we know

something happened. And the cloud of suspicion is going to form a thick fog right around us.

She lifts her chin the tiniest bit. “Fine.”

“I see you’re having cameras installed.” Detective Wentz lifts one finger and points at Blake. “I’m guessing there weren’t any up before this happened.”

Jillian huffs out a breath and shakes her head. “No. This isn’t exactly a luxury complex.”

Detective Wentz continues writing in his notebook, talking as his pen moves. “You know any of your neighbors? Someone I might talk to? See if they saw or heard anything unusual last night?”

“Everybody on the first floor hears everything.” She purses her lips. “But if you want to talk to them you should do it sooner rather than later. They all go to bed early. And they’ll be pissed if you interrupt them during Jeopardy.”

Detective Wentz jerks his head in a nod, flipping his notebook closed and tucking it back into his pocket. “I’ll be in touch. If you think of anything else that might be useful, let me know.”

Jillian’s lips turn white from how tight they’re pressed together and I know she’s working hard to keep her mouth shut.

I’m proud of her. I won’t tell her that because I feel like it might be poking a bear, but it doesn’t change the fact that I am. I know she likes to say what she thinks, and the fact that she’s trusting me and holding back her thoughts bolsters my desire to prove I’m worthy of that trust.

That means I’m going to find out what’s going on. I don’t care what it costs me. I’ll put a fucking camera up in every corner of this building. Every light post in the parking lot of the strip mall. Whatever it takes to find out who did this to her apartment and to prove we’re right about what we heard.

I shake the detective’s hand and walk him to the front door, waving as he heads down to the first floor. I’m not surprised to find Jillian standing right behind me when I turn around.

“He still thinks we’re wrong about last night.” Outrage is written all over her face. “Do I just look like a fucking idiot? Like I don’t know the difference between freaking gunshots and someone slamming a door?”

I step in, resting my hands on her shoulders, not in an attempt to soothe her, but just in case I need to grab her if she decides to chase Detective Wentz down. “Take a deep breath.”

Her eyes narrow. “No.”

“Then at least consider that there’s going to come a point when he’s going to start questioning how we’re so sure those were gunshots and it might give him the wrong idea.”

Jillian’s lips press together even tighter than they were before, smashing so hard that I can’t see any hint of their pale pink color. “Shit. I didn’t think of that.” She throws her arms up. “So what are we supposed to do? Just act like nothing happened?”

I can only imagine how frustrating this is for her. Not only is her business in danger if we don’t find a way to talk to Mauricio, but now her home isn’t safe either. “We will figure out what’s going on.” I give her shoulders a little squeeze. “I promise.” I pause, bracing myself for her reaction to what I say next. “But I think you should stay with me until that happens.” It’s the safest plan, which is why I can say it with as much confidence as I do.

But it’s also the most appealing plan. One that will keep Jillian close enough that I’ll know she’s safe. And close enough that I’ll have plenty of opportunities to keep showing her that, while I might not be the most experienced man when it comes to relationships and all they entail, I still have a lot to offer.

Her admission about exes put a little bit of a damper on my hopes for our future. A woman like Jillian would only be single by choice. That means she’s exceptionally selective about the men she allows in her life and would rather be alone than with someone who’s wrong. After spending a little time with her, I feel confident I’m not wrong. But I’m also not positive I’m what she will consider right.

Jillian purses her lips like she's mulling over her options, and the fact that she doesn't immediately shoot me down gives me hope. "Fine."

I'm surprised at how quickly she agrees and immediately spin her toward her bedroom. "Go pack the rest of your stuff so we can get out of here as soon as Blake's finished."

Once again, Jillian is surprisingly agreeable and disappears into her room.

I watch her go and then drop down to the couch, staring across the room as I wrack my brain for what to do next.

I've got cameras up everywhere I can think of—her bookstore, her apartment, my gym. I've blown up Mauricio's phone to the point that I'm starting to get more than a little concerned for his well-being. Our landlord has never been particularly easy to communicate with, but I can't imagine anyone would ignore phone calls reporting gunshots in their offices. Even if they are currently out of the country.

"Noah?" The odd tone of Jillian's voice pulls my attention to the doorway of her bedroom. Her skin is a little pale and her expression is uneasy.

I stand up. "What's wrong?"

She lifts the item gripped tightly in her hands, spreading out the sweatshirt so I can clearly see the design printed across the front of it. "I know this is going to shock you, but I don't own a sweatshirt like this." She takes a shaky breath. "I don't know where it would have come from."

I do. And its appearance here just made what happened in Jillian's apartment even more clearly connected to what happened at Mauricio's office last night.

"Where was it?" I go to where she stands, taking the well-worn hoodie from her so I can check for the tiny rip under the seam of one arm.

"It was hanging in my closet." Jillian focuses on my face. "You brought it here, right? You just hung it up when I wasn't looking to try to be funny, right?"

It's clear she wants me to admit I'm the one who placed the hoodie in her space.

I shake my head, happier than I should be to give her the answer I know is going to upset her. "No. It wasn't me."

And if it wasn't me it means it was whoever saw us at the offices last night. It means that Jillian is no longer the only one they're targeting. It means she's not in this alone. It means her ass isn't the only one on the line.

I shouldn't be relieved to know that a criminal is targeting me too, but the thought of Jillian being their sole focus made me sick to my stomach.

Someone knocks on Jillian's door and I immediately spin to face it, shoving her behind me the same way I did last night when we noticed her apartment was open. "Are you expecting someone?"

Today Jillian doesn't try to step around me and that tells me she's more rattled than she wants me to know. "No. No one comes here."

That makes me sad because I understand what it's like to be alone, but it also makes me feel like I understand her a little more.

And that maybe she could understand me if she tried.

"Stay behind me." I creep across the room with Jillian at my back, her hands gripping my shirt. I lean to peek out the peephole and relax a little when the man on the other side is old enough to be my grandpa. "Do you know an old man?"

Jillian sighs, her hands dropping from my shirt. "It's probably Mr. Rigellio." She bumps me out of the way and peeks through the hole. "I bet he's having problems with his Internet again." She opens the door with a bright smile. "Hi, Mr. Rigellio. Is everything okay?"

The older man's bushy eyebrows are pinched tight together, a look of concern on his sagging face. "I just talked to a police officer who said someone broke into your apartment." His dark eyes move over Jillian's shoulder to the space behind us. "I wanted to make sure you were okay."

She gives him a soft smile as she reaches out to rest one hand on his arm. “I’m fine. I wasn’t here when it happened.” She rubs her lips together, pausing just a second. “Did you see or hear anything strange last night?”

Mr. Rigellio looks apologetic, his shoulder slumping the tiniest bit. “It did seem a little louder in your bedroom than normal, but I thought maybe...” His eyes come my way, narrowing the tiniest bit before moving back to Jillian. “Maybe you had company.”

Jillian huffs out a little laugh. “You should probably know better than that.”

I can’t stop staring at her. She’s almost like a different person talking to him. Relaxed and sweet and gentle.

“I’m putting up some cameras now, but I won’t be staying here for the next little bit, so if you hear anything would you call me?”

Mr. Rigellio’s eyes come back to me and it’s very clear he’s sizing me up. “Of course.” He stands a little taller, keeping his focus on me. “I would do anything for you, Miss Jillian.”

Jillian finally glances my way before refocusing on Mr. Rigellio. “I’m sorry. It’s been a rough night.” She rests one hand on my bicep. “Mr. Rigellio, this is my friend Noah. Noah, this is my downstairs neighbor, Mr. Rigellio.”

I hold one hand out, giving him a respectful smile. “It’s great to meet you.”

Mr. Rigellio shakes my hand, but his appraising stare lingers. “How do you know Jillian?”

I keep shaking his hand because he hasn’t let go and I know enough about situations like this to realize I shouldn’t let go first. “We work next door to each other.” I keep it simple because I made the mistake of trying to oversell myself to Jillian and I’m not doing it with Mr. Rigellio.

“Are you from around here?” Mr. Rigellio keeps shaking my hand, his grip getting a little tighter with each passing second.

“No. I’m from Boston.” I match his grip, ready for whatever he asks next.

“What brought you to Sweet Side?”

“My grandmother.” I smile at her memory, but also at how confidently this hunched old man is staring me down. “She moved here after my grandpa died and I came to be closer to her.”

One of Mr. Rigellio’s bushy brows lifts. “She single?”

I click my tongue, hating to give him the bad news. “Sadly, she and my grandpa are together again.”

“Oh.” His stern expression softens. “I’m sorry to hear that.” His hand finally slides free of mine, but his focus stays on my face. “Come down to my apartment before you two leave.” He meets my gaze. “I want to be sure I have your information, Noah.” He barely smiles. “Just in case I need to get ahold of you.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JILLIAN

BARNABY IS SCREAMING his head off when we walk into Noah's house, squawking at us from the perch in his cage, the yellow feathers on his head standing at full attention.

I carry my bag in and set it on the island, unloading my purse next to it and dropping my car keys onto the granite surface. "He doesn't sound happy to see us."

Noah comes in behind me, rolling my suitcase at his side. "Barnaby only has one sound and it's loud." He rocks my suitcase back onto its base before going to Barnaby's cage and opening the door. "Calm your tits. She doesn't want to hear you."

Barnaby immediately swings out the open door, using his beak for leverage as he crawls up the side of the cage. He goes straight to the dish on top and starts screaming again.

Noah shakes his head, turning away. "You're a brat, Barnaby." He goes to the fridge, opening it up to pull out a container of chopped fruit. He carries it back to Barnaby and drops a few pieces into the bowl. "There. Now please shut up."

Barnaby immediately starts digging through his snack, beak working as he picks out the grapes first.

"I never really imagined you as a bird guy." I scan the high-end finishes of Noah's home, looking over the custom cabinetry of the kitchen and the built-in shelving surrounding the television in the great room a little closer than I did before.

My imagination put him living in the adult version of a frat house with roommates and sticky carpet. I assumed he partied regularly and picked up women wherever he went.

How much of that was the way he looked and how much of it was my own personal biases is a question I'm considering more and more.

"I don't know that I would say I'm a bird person." He slides the fruit back into the refrigerator and turns to me. "But my grandmother loved Barnaby and I promised her I would take care of him, so I guess I'm bird person adjacent."

I accidentally smile, something that's been happening more regularly than I want to think about. "Bird person adjacent?" I try to smother my smile down but it doesn't work. "That's an interesting way of putting it."

"I'm an interesting guy." Noah grabs my suitcase, tipping it onto its wheels before rolling it down the hall in the direction of his bedroom. "Come on. Let's get you set up."

I grab my bags and follow behind him. "Do you have a guest room or something? I can sleep on whatever. Twin bed. Air mattress. Whatever." I'm babbling which is something I make sure I never do. I usually keep my mouth shut, staring men down until they realize I'm not the one and today is not the day.

But I feel a little bad about taking over so much of Noah's life. Last night I was so tired I basically collapsed wherever he put me, which happened to be his own bed. But I'm not trying to displace Noah, and I'm sure as heck not trying to make myself comfortable here. This is just a temporary thing and then I will be out of his hair and he will be out of my life.

And the thought doesn't bother me at all. Not even a little. The funny feeling in my stomach is probably from that stupid protein coffee he made me this morning.

"Unfortunately, there's only one bed in this house." Noah flips on the light in his room, continuing to drag my suitcase across the carpet and into the walk-in closet. "It's a preemptive defense."

I set my bags down on the bed, making sure I don't think too hard about the possibility that Noah might be sleeping beside me tonight. "What are you defending yourself from?"

"Mostly my parents visiting." He reaches up to shove all his clothes to one side, separating them from the empty hangers lined neatly down the bar. "I love them, but they try to get into my business as it is. Things get a little too close if I let them stay with me when they come to town."

"I can understand that." My mother calls every Sunday and grills me about my life and the people I'm allowing in it. For a while I didn't mind. It felt like she was looking out for me and ensuring I wasn't making the same mistakes she did. But at a certain point, that started to change, and her constant prodding felt a little less like concern and a little more like control, so our chat sessions have gotten progressively shorter and shallower.

Noah glances out at me, pausing in his closet reorganization. "Are your parents the same way?"

I lift one shoulder in a shrug, trying to seem nonchalant. "My mom doesn't really come to town, so she's only as involved as she can be from half a country away, which is probably good." I chew on my lower lip, considering stopping there, but for some reason I continue. "I don't talk to my dad. I haven't heard from him since I was a little girl."

"Oh." Noah studies me for a second. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

If he'd asked me that a year ago I would have said a good thing. My father was selfish enough to walk away from me so he doesn't deserve to be in my life.

That's still how I feel, but I'm realizing that his absence has possibly fed into some problematic thoughts and opinions I might be carrying around.

Thoughts and opinions that led me to decide Noah was nothing more than a fuck boy that didn't have two brain cells to rub together. Now that I'm staring down a very different sort of man, I'm feeling a little guilty about that.

I give Noah another shrug. “I’m not sure.” I thought I knew. Thought that my father leaving made me smarter than everyone else. Wiser. Less likely to fall prey to the games and manipulations dished out by the male species.

But I’m wondering if it also made me cynical. Judgmental. Maybe a little self-righteous. The possibility is a tough pill to swallow and right now I’m just not quite capable of doing it, so I won’t.

To my surprise though, Noah nods. “I understand that.” He rakes one hand through his dark hair. “Some things can be both good and bad, I guess.”

His immediate understanding soothes that tiny part of me that’s been struggling to rectify who I am and how I view the world. “Exactly.” I deflate a little. “But I never really looked at it that way until very recently.”

I don’t technically want to be looking at it that way now. It was so much easier when I hated men. Was positive I knew exactly what they were and what they wanted. This place I’m in now is uncomfortable and strange.

Noah looks around the room, shifting on his feet when his eyes fall on the bed. “I’ll let you get situated.” He edges toward the door. “You can use any drawers or hangers you want. Whatever is easiest for you.”

He ducks out of the room, disappearing and leaving me alone in his space with permission to pile my shit up everywhere. It’s another odd thing I would never have expected from any man, especially this one.

Men who look like Noah are supposed to be the worst. Arrogant. Cocky. So full of themselves it’s amazing they don’t explode. Selfish. Only focused on what matters to them and what makes them happy.

And if my mother had any clue I was spending time with him she would drill all those things back into my brain. Do her best to remind me why we use men before they can use us.

But Noah hasn’t used me. Not a single time. In *any* way. Hasn’t even tried. If anything he’s been overly giving, which

is sweet and surprising and totally turning my world and everything I thought I knew upside down.

It's also a little frustrating, because sometimes a girl just wants a penis in her vagina. And my sad little vagina hasn't seen a penis in forever. Long enough I almost forget what it feels like.

I glance at the bed again, thinking of what happened across it this morning. Maybe I'll take a crack at ending my dry spell tonight. Figure out a way to make the using in this situation more mutual.

I quickly put away a few of my things, taking up as little space as possible. Once everything is stashed I make my way to the kitchen and find Noah standing at the counter chopping vegetables, a towel slung across one wide shoulder and a wide skillet on the stove beside him. I nearly roll my eyes because he *would* find yet another way to royally fuck up my sense of self. And he *would* do it in the nicest, most considerate way possible because that's just turning out to be who Noah is.

Considerate. Thoughtful. Giving. *Hung*.

That last one isn't so much a description of his personality, but still seems relevant.

I plaster on a smile in spite of the full-fledged identity crisis I'm going through. "What are you doing?"

"I figured we could have something simple for dinner and then..." His voice drifts off. If it was anyone else I would think they were being suggestive, but I'm starting to realize that's not how Noah is built.

"Then we can play board games and drink hot chocolate." I finish for him, hoping it eases the uncomfortable looking frustration pinching his handsome features.

I'm not great at teasing, It's not something I've done much of, but the suggestion does seem to relax him a little.

"If that's how you like to spend your evenings then you will be happy to hear I also inherited my grandmother's board games." He turns away from me, stepping toward the sink.

“Oh no.” I cringe, pointing at the back of his shirt. “Your other little inheritance left you a present down your back.”

Noah cranks his head as far as he can, trying to peer down the fabric of his shirt. “God dammit, Barnaby.” He steps out of the kitchen, coming toward me as he grabs the hem of his T-shirt and lifts it over his head, bringing me face-to-face with the wide wall of his chest.

I caught a glimpse of it last night between the planks of his fence, and then again when he crawled out of the hot tub, but this is the first time I’ve gotten to witness it up close and personal, and it’s even more majestic than I thought.

Every inch of him is solid and hard, sculpted to perfection by hours of effort and five million protein coffees.

I swallow, working hard to get some moisture into my suddenly dry mouth as my eyes shamelessly skim down his front. They pause, caught on the sides of his abdomen. “Did you scratch yourself?” I reach out and brush my fingers along the angry-looking red marks streaked across the tanned skin of his stomach. I slide them over his middle, finding the area a little softer and more mobile than I expected.

Noah’s eyes drop to where I’m touching him. “No.” He clears his throat, raising his gaze to the ceiling. “Those are stretch marks.”

I give him a little smirk he can’t see, poking at his abs just because I want to see how they feel. “I guess that’s what happens when you get too buff too fast.”

Noah’s eyes slowly come to mine and he shakes his head. “Those aren’t from that.” His chin tucks as he looks at the floor. “I actually haven’t looked like this for very long.”

I move my fingers over his stomach, pressing a little more. Now that he’s pointing it out, the elasticity of his skin is a little off. Not tight and dense like I would have expected. “What did you used to look like?”

His hands fist at his sides, fingers spreading before fisting tight again. “I was about eighty pounds heavier than I am now until I was twenty-three.”

My eyes jump to his face. “You lost eighty pounds?”

He shrugs. “It kind of just happened.”

“I’m pretty sure something like that doesn’t just happen.”

Noah holds my eyes for a second, expression serious. “It does when you’re stressed to the point you end up in the hospital thinking you’re having a heart attack.”

My jaw drops a little. “Oh shit.”

Noah has always seemed so happy. So easy going. So full of positivity and excitement. Imagining him any other way is nearly impossible.

“Pretty much.” He goes quiet, like this is an uncomfortable topic for him.

And I want to leave it alone, really I do...

“Are you feeling better now?” I can’t stop myself from asking. From worrying a little about him.

“Much better.” Noah relaxes the tiniest bit. “Working out really saved me.” The bunch of his shoulders eases down just a little more. “That’s why I switched jobs and became a personal trainer. So I could help other people who are struggling like I was.”

Not only is he sweet and selfless, but now he’s noble too? Fucking hell.

“What was your job before you became a personal trainer?” Please let it be something terrible. Something horrible that will make him less appealing.

Is killing kittens a job?

“I was in finance.” He’s still holding completely still as my fingers accidentally continue stroking across his skin, tracing both the lines of muscle and the lines of growth. “I graduated at the top of my class and landed my dream job right out of school.”

I focus on where I follow the paths across his body. “Sounds like maybe it was more of a nightmare.”

He huffs out a deep laugh. “Definitely.” Noah reaches out to smooth back a stray bit of my hair, curling it behind one ear. “When I found out my grandma was going downhill I decided it was time to do something different. I left my job in Boston, packed up everything I owned, and moved here.”

I glance up at his face. “You just started as a personal trainer when you moved to Florida?”

“No.” Noah’s finger slides along the side of my face, the continued contact stealing my focus. “I did it on the side for a couple of years while I was still working my corporate job.” His dark eyes go to where he’s touching my skin. “I thought since I’d spent so much money and time getting that job I had to keep it even though I was miserable. Being in the gym helped me work through all that misery and keep it in check.”

I inch in a little closer. “Sometimes it’s hard to stop doing something, even when you know it’s not good for you anymore.”

I think that’s the spot I’m wedged into.

I’ve spent my whole life being bitter over someone else’s pain. I’ve started to realize it’s not my burden to bear, but it’s all I’ve ever known. And I’m not sure who I am without it.

But Noah did it. Noah found a way to be brave enough to walk away from a life that made him sick and start over from scratch.

I did half of that. I walked away. Started from scratch. But I brought all the same baggage with me.

And I’m still carrying it around.

Noah’s hand curves against my cheek, the warmth of it solid and comforting. “Unfortunately, that’s a lesson I’m still learning.”

I snort out a little laugh as I look him over. “I dunno. It looks like you’re in a pretty good place to me.”

He shakes his head, eyes holding mine. “No. I’m not.”

The intensity in the way he’s looking at me makes it hard to breathe. “You’re not?”

“No.” His thumb comes to trail across my lower lip. “And I nearly fucked up my chances with you because of it.”

I can't force air into my lungs. I can barely blink. All because of the way he's looking at me. No one has ever looked at me like this.

Like they actually see me. See who I am under all the layers I keep wrapped tight.

And it makes me a little stupid. A little crazy.

Crazy enough to push up on my toes and put my lips on his.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE PRESS OF Jillian's lips against mine comes as a complete shock. One that makes my whole body go still and my breathing stall out.

The unexpectedness of it has left me little time to prepare or obsess over what I should do, and maybe that's a good thing. Maybe that's why I'm able to curve my hands around her face and step closer, angling my head to flick my tongue across the seam of her lips. They immediately part and her tongue slicks against mine, the sensation making me groan as I pull her closer.

I want to please her. Want to conquer Jillian the same way I have everything else in my life.

Maybe more.

I slide my hands down her body, wrapping my arms around her back so I can heft her up against me, lifting her feet off the ground. Jillian's legs immediately wrap around my waist, holding tight as I carry her down the hall to my bedroom, fully intending to peel away her clothes and wring every last orgasm possible from her body.

The thought of it already has my balls pulled tight, making it clear it will take every ounce of control I have to keep from coming in my pants again.

But it's worth the risk.

I lay Jillian across the bed, making sure I have plenty of room to work at the foot before sliding my lips across her jaw and down her neck. I barely make it to her collarbone before

her feet hook under my butt and lock, preventing me from moving any farther.

“Where are you going?” She wiggles under me, using the strength in her legs to shove me back up until we’re face-to-face. “Stay here for a minute.”

“Okay.” I’m desperate to feel her thighs squeezing my face as she comes on my tongue, but I can’t make myself deny her request. “Only for a minute though.”

Jillian pinches her lower lip between her teeth, hands pressing against my chest. “You really like to do that, don’t you?”

“I fucking love it.” I’m not going to deny it. Going down on a woman is something I’ve fantasized about my whole life. And it has lived up to every expectation I had. “And right now you’re keeping me from it.”

“Right now I’m trying to work in a little variety.” Her soft hands slide down my stomach before gripping the waistband of my shorts. “Maybe something that might be good for you too.”

“That is good for me too.”

Jillian’s eyes move over my face. “Is that what happened this morning?”

I’m still embarrassed about the whole thing, but maybe if she knows it’s not one-sided, Jillian will let me have what I want. “That was a one-time thing.”

Her brows barely lift. “So you don’t normally come when you go down on a woman?”

This is the kind of conversation I was really hoping to skip right over. I want Jillian to believe I know exactly what I’m doing, and so far I seem to be accomplishing that. Unfortunately, there’s going to come a point that may not be the case, so I decide to bite the bullet. Put the truth out there. “Technically, you’re the first woman I’ve ever gone down on.”

To my surprise, Jillian laughs. The sound immediately shrivels my hard-on and I try to pull away, but what she says

next stops me.

“Right. Sure.” She rolls her eyes. “I’m not the kind of girl who expects you to be a saint, Noah, so you can cut the shit.”

She thinks I’m lying?

It’s flattering enough that I stick with honesty. “It’s true.” I swallow before forcing out a little more transparency. “I don’t actually have much experience, sexually speaking.”

She continues laughing, but after a second the sound dies off and she sobers. “You can’t be serious. There’s no way.” Her eyes move down my body. “Look at you.”

“I haven’t always looked like this, remember?” Not that looks were my issue. I actually got more interest from women when I was overweight. Now people have completely different expectations of me and the pressure has kept me stunted. Even more afraid to put myself out there than I was before. “And I’m pretty sure looks have very little to do with it.”

“Actually, looks probably have a lot to do with it.” She pauses, her eyes slowly coming to mine. “I might have made a few snap judgments about you based on the way you look.”

I can’t pass up the opportunity for a peek into the female mind, especially hers. “Really? Were your judgments correct?”

“No.” Jillian exhales loudly, like she’s frustrated by the admission. “You aren’t at all what I expected you to be.”

It’s a vague answer and I’m not letting her off that easily. I know she’s trying to get out of telling me exactly what she first thought, but this is important information. This is what has kept me isolated and alone for most of my life, suffering from an elevated level of self-awareness that fueled the anxiety controlling my thoughts and actions. “What were you wrong about?”

Her lips purse together. “I sort of expected you to be the kind of guy who just went around screwing every woman he could manage to put his dick in.” She pauses. “I also assumed you were full of yourself.” Another pause. “Selfish. Self-centered. Egotistical.” Another purse of her lips. “And greedy.”

Wow. That is not a great first impression I made on her. Unfortunately, I can sort of see where most of it came from.

Not the last one though. “You thought I was greedy?”

Jillian’s brows lift behind her glasses. “Of course. Aren’t most men?”

The blanket coverage of her statement makes me pause. “No.” I shake my head, thinking through the men who’ve worked for me over the years and the ones I knew before. “I mean, some of them are, but so are some women.”

Jillian rubs her lips together, looking a little more uncertain than I’m used to seeing her. “I guess you’re right.”

All the fire she usually carries seems to have bled out of her very suddenly, and I don’t like it. I don’t like whatever did this to her. I trace the conversation back to the moment it turned, the moment she changed, and realize something that sits heavy in my gut. “Why do you think men are selfish?”

She’s quiet for a minute, indecision in her gaze as she considers whether or not to answer my question, which makes me think I’ve found the reason Jillian is the way she is.

She doesn’t just think men are greedy and selfish, she also thinks we’re unworthy of her trust.

“I told you how I haven’t seen my dad since I was little.” Her voice is soft and it cuts right into my gut. “He walked away from me and my mom so he could marry someone new and I basically never heard from him again.” Her voice wavers the tiniest bit. “He abandoned me like I didn’t matter.” She takes a shaky breath. “Because I didn’t.”

I’ve never been mad at a person I don’t know before. Never felt the urge to hunt a stranger down and punish them. But that’s what I feel right now because that man and the memory of what he did turns Jillian into a completely different person in the blink of an eye. One that breaks my heart and explains so much more than I wanted to know.

I reach up, sliding my hand down the soft wave of her hair where it hangs loose around her face. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

There's nothing else I can say. Telling her she's better off without him won't make Jillian feel any better. Calling him names and pointing out what a piece of shit he is might actually make her feel worse. Might even make her more upset because that piece of shit still contributed half her DNA.

Jillian gives me a weak smile. "Thanks." She takes a shaky breath. "I don't like to talk about him because I don't like to feel like he has any effect on my life." Her eyes drop mine and she suddenly looks very sad. "But I think he does. And I'm the one that let it happen."

"Sometimes it's hard to walk away from the past, Jillian." I stroke my thumb against her cheek, needing some way to soothe her. To soothe myself. "I haven't figured out how to do it, and I can promise you I have tried."

Jillian's little smile lifts a bit more, making it seem like her mood might be lightening. "I think you're just trying to make me feel better."

"I'm definitely trying to make you feel better. That's kind of my thing." I worked so hard to hide who I really am from her and ended up leading her to believe I should be lumped in with the piece of shit that left his wife and daughter.

My insecurities managed to land me squarely in the same spot her father occupied.

I'm not doing that anymore. From now on I'm telling Jillian the truth. I'm being who I am. And I need to make sure she understands why. "But in this case I'm also telling you the truth." I roll off to one side, stretching out beside her and propping my head up on one arm, letting my other drape across her waist. "I had a few bad experiences with sex in college and was terrified that I would always end up in the same place, so I started putting pressure on myself. Started trying to act differently hoping that it would change the outcome."

Jillian rolls toward me, putting us face-to-face. "Did it?"

I nod. "It definitely did. I went from having embarrassing sex to having no sex."

Jillian curves one hand under the side of her face, wiggling a little closer. “I’m going to need you to explain to me what embarrassing sex is, because I’m pretty sure all sex starts out embarrassing.”

“I’m positive not all sex is embarrassing.”

Jillian snorts out a little laugh. “You think two people get naked together and it’s not embarrassing?” She smiles. “Because it definitely is, but usually horniness gets you through.”

She’s narrowed down my problem immediately. “I’m not sure that works for everyone.”

Jillian’s brows lift in surprise. “No?”

I shake my head. “I have a hard time staying—” I have to force myself to finish, “*invested* if the person I’m with isn’t having a good time.”

Jillian’s lips press together and her cheeks flush the tiniest bit. “So you don’t have fun if the person you’re with isn’t having fun?”

I nod, a little relieved that she picked up on my meaning so quickly. “I can’t really keep things where they’re supposed to be.”

Jillian’s lips part as she scoots a little closer. “So you don’t stay hard if the girl you’re with isn’t having a good time?”

It’s a problem most guys my age aren’t faced with, but one that probably comes for most of us eventually. That doesn’t make it any easier when you’re in your early twenties, naked and desperate to have sex, only to discover your body is completely uncooperative.

Jillian’s hand comes to rest in the center of my chest. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.” I brace myself, knowing whatever she has to ask will be uncomfortable, but ready to try to give her the best answer I can.

“Have you actually had sex?” The lack of judgment in her tone makes things a little easier.

“I’ve never had sex to completion.” I’ve managed to get to penetration a handful of times, but was never able to fulfill the climax contract that comes with sexual interactions. As soon as it was clear the woman under me wasn’t loving what was happening, I stopped loving it too.

“Oh.” The word rushes out on an exhale and Jillian scoots even closer. “Has a woman ever gotten you off?”

That’s also a tricky question to answer. “Technically I got off because of you this morning.”

Jillian rubs her lips together, the hand on my chest moving a little lower. “But I didn’t actually get you off. You got yourself off while you were also getting me off.” Her fingers trace along the line of my shorts again, dipping into the waistband. “Maybe we could test something out. See if maybe I can accomplish it.”

I suck in a breath as her hand slides into my shorts. “You want to try to get me off?”

I want to be excited about it. I know any man in my position would be thrilled to have a woman offering to make him come.

But my dick is already shriveling up, shrinking back at the thought of being forced to lay here while she labors on top of me.

“Oh.” Jillian’s eyes widen as her fingers trace along my softening cock. “That happens quick, doesn’t it?”

I cover my face with one hand, already humiliated and neither of us have our clothes off. “It’s not you. It’s me.”

This is why I don’t try to have sex. Why I struggle to get past the first date with any woman I do convince to go out with me. I know what will happen. I know I can’t take them to bed the way a normal man would.

Jillian’s hand slides out of my pants and I’m sure she’s ready to get the hell out of Dodge. Put herself up in a hotel room and leave me on my own.

But instead she grabs my wrist and pulls my hand from my face. “Don’t be embarrassed. Sex is nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Her reaction is shocking, but so is her opinion on sex. “You just said sex is always embarrassing.”

“Maybe embarrassing was the wrong word.” She lifts up onto her hands and knees, crawling over me. “There’s just a learning curve that comes with it.” She pushes her lower lip out. “But I should probably tell you I’m not great at navigating that learning curve either.” She rocks back on her heels, butt resting on my knees. “I tend to kind of come into things like this guns blazing, ready to make sure I get off.”

“If you’re trying to make me feel better about the fact that my dick isn’t hard right now, you are epically failing.” But the thought of Jillian walking into my bedroom, slamming the door and coming at me intent on satisfying her own needs, has my cock re-interested in the situation. Invested enough that it’s starting to push against the front of my shorts again.

A fact that Jillian doesn’t miss.

Her eyes drop down and her lips curve in a slow smile. “Interesting.” She hooks her fingers into the waistband of my pants, grabbing shorts and underwear and dragging the whole thing down my body, freeing my partially erect cock. “Will it make any difference if I tell you that I refuse to walk away from a sexual situation without getting off?”

I can’t pull my gaze from her as she tosses my remaining clothes over the side of the bed then turns her attention to the dress she’s wearing. “Yeah. That might make me feel a little better.”

Jillian grabs the hem of her dress and lifts it, stretching the soft fabric up and off her body in one smooth movement, then she quickly unhooks her bra and shakes it loose. “Good.” She shimmy out of her panties before kicking them over the side of the bed. “Then let’s make a deal.” She crawls up the mattress, bringing her face even with mine. “If I stop having fun we just come up with a different plan of attack.”

I nod, eager to please her. Eager to finally please myself. “Okay. Deal.”

She gives me a wicked smile that sends even more blood rushing south. “Excellent.” Jillian grabs the pillow under my head and yanks it free, throwing it to the bottom of the bed. “Then brace yourself.”

A second later her body swings across mine, cunt settling right on my face, thighs at my ears. I groan as the soft slickness of her body meets my tongue, positive I’ve died and gone to heaven.

But then the wet heat of her mouth sinks over my cock and I realize I’m actually caught somewhere between heaven and hell.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JILLIAN

I HAVE NO problem taking the lead when it comes to sex. I actually prefer it. I like knowing that no matter what else happens, I'm going to get mine.

And honestly, that's always been my one and only concern.

I never really gave a shit if the guy I was with had fun, mostly because I was led to believe that sex is always fun for men. Not that it was a hard sell. The orgasm gap is real and I took it upon myself to do everything in my power to close it as much as possible.

But, once again, I'm faced with a reality I'm not sure how to process. Another example of the fact that maybe I have been grouping the male gender together a little too harshly.

As a result, for the first time possibly ever, I'm actually interested in my partner's enjoyment. Maybe it's because I like a challenge. Maybe I want to claim the title as the first woman to get Noah off.

But I don't think that's it. I think my issue is a little more complicated than that—a little more emotionally tied—and I'm not quite ready to tackle something like that. Not while Noah's cock is in my mouth anyway.

I shift around on the bed, finding my balance as I work my way down the thick line of his increasingly rigid shaft. The solid length of his erection makes it clear my idea to test out a little sixty-nine action was a good one, and I smile to myself when he groans against my pussy.

But the vibration of Noah's groan makes my smug smile short-lived. It adds a distracting layer of stimulation to my already throbbing clit as his tongue slides against me, warm and wet, dragging my attention to the ache between my legs. Luckily a salty slick of precum leaks from the tip of Noah's fully-erect cock, bringing my focus back where it's supposed to be.

I lean forward, swallowing down as much of him as I can manage, but the move pulls my body away from his face. Noah's quite a bit taller than me, and the height difference makes this a little more challenging than I expected.

So does Noah's dedication to my enjoyment.

The second I shift away, he grips my hips, the tips of his fingers sinking into the cheeks of my ass as he yanks me back up, mouth locking hungrily onto my pussy. His tongue slides against me in a way that makes it difficult as hell to get back to the task at hand, but I'm going to do it.

One way or the other, Noah's getting off.

I put my weight on one hand, bringing the other to fist the base of his cock, making up for what my mouth can't reach. Wrapping my lips around him again, I stretch to take in as much of him as I can as my hand follows along.

It's not long before Noah groans again, the sound reverberating across my clit and making me gasp.

I pull off him, continuing to work my hand as his arms wrap around me, pinning my body to his, like he wants to make sure I don't get away. The move is something I wouldn't tolerate from anyone else, but I don't want to get away either, so I decide not to be mad about it.

I drop my forehead to his belly, somehow still managing to work my hand over him as he laps at my clit with unerring accuracy. "You are so fucking good at that."

I'm glad that he likes getting me off—so very, very glad—but I really want to return the favor.

Which is very unlike me.

I've gone my whole life thinking men didn't give a shit about my pleasure, and the fact that it's what gets Noah all hot and bothered makes me all hot and bothered. It sends me into a vicious cycle of enjoying myself to the point I lose focus and then remembering I'm not the only person who's supposed to get off this time.

So I double down, wrapping my mouth around his straining cock as Noah's lips lock around my clit, each moan he makes echoing in my own throat as I fight against the need building inside me.

Noah is making it hard as hell for me to multitask. Each stroke of his tongue is impeccable and insistent, like his sole purpose in life is to make me come on his face.

Again.

But he's waited a long damn time for this moment and I want it to be memorable. I want it to be epic. For both of us.

I continue working my mouth over him, straining to reach as much of him as I can, letting my tongue slide against his skin as my lips hug him tight. It takes every bit of willpower I have to allot at least a tiny portion of my brain cells to what I'm doing instead of what I'm receiving. Noah's mouth is impossible to ignore, but I do my best not to be completely consumed by the greedy way it latches onto me. The hungry way he laps at my flesh and sucks against my clit.

I end up matching my movements and enthusiasm to his, rocking my mouth in time with each stroke of his tongue. The symmetry takes an act I normally considered laborious and makes it into something completely different. Something shared instead of offered. My pleasure is now timed with his. When he groans the sound vibrates against me, making me groan in response. Each of us feeds off the other, our experience and enjoyment tied tightly together.

Everything is cyclical, spinning together in movements that become faster and faster. Sensations that become more and more intense until there's no putting off the inevitable.

My whole body goes tense as my climax hits me out of nowhere, seizing my senses and shorting out my brain. I barely notice as Noah grips my arms, pulling them behind my back and using the grip to yank me upright so I'm sitting directly on his face, riding out the orgasm claiming my soul.

After what feels like forever, my body sags to one side, dropping to the mattress as I struggle to catch my breath. Noah props up on one elbow, face still wet from my body as his dark eyes drag over me.

"Shit." I drape one arm over my eyes, trying to block out the sexy smugness of his expression. "You distracted me."

"If you think I'm going to apologize for that, you're wrong." He shifts on the mattress and I peek out from under my arm, meeting his eyes as he climbs off the bed.

"But we were both supposed to get off." I should not be complaining about this. His orgasm shouldn't be any of my concern.

Noah grabs his shorts from the floor. "We did."

I watch as he drags the soft fabric over a series of cloudy white lines cutting across his abdomen. I sit up, staring as he cleans up the mess I didn't notice until just now. "But I was terrible."

"I told you," Noah tosses the shorts into the laundry basket in the corner, "I get off when you get off."

I never would have believed it was possible, but I've witnessed it twice now, so it must be true. "That's convenient."

He gives me a devilish smile that is nothing like the one he normally dishes out. "I'm starting to see the possibilities it offers."

I swallow hard at that.

Virginity is something I've never given any value to. I still don't.

But I have to admit I like the thought of seeing Noah's face the first time he comes during sex. Enough that it makes me wonder how long it will take him to recover so I can find out.

Noah studies me, slowly lifting one brow. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

I could lie. Tell him I’m just still stuck in the stares that follow having your third orgasm in twenty-four hours.

But what would the fun in that be?

“I’m thinking we should have sex.” My thighs clench together at the thought, like I haven’t had more action today than I’ve had in the last three years.

Noah’s eyes darken and his nostrils flare, telling me I’m not the only one who finds the idea worth considering. “Do you?”

I nod. “Don’t you?”

This is not the first time I’ve propositioned a man, but it *is* the first time I’ve actually been invested in his answer. Normally I’m indifferent. There are plenty of willing dicks to go around and they’re easy enough to find.

But this isn’t actually about Noah’s dick. I don’t just want to use him for my own satisfaction. As much as I’m trying to avoid it, the truth is this is about more than that.

Noah slowly comes toward me, his eyes staying locked on mine. He stops right in front of me, close enough that his chest brushes the tips of my nipples. “I will take anything you’re willing to give me, Jillian.”

My heart skips a beat and I almost giggle.

Fucking *giggle*.

What in the hell is happening to me?

This is the point in a romance novel that I roll my eyes, positive no real live man would ever say something so fucking sexy.

“Ugh.” I drop my head back. “You are *killing* me.” I shove at his chest, but can’t work up any real aggravation. “I need you to tell me something bad about yourself. Preferably something horrifying or at least disgusting.”

Noah’s lips quirk. “Let me show you something.”

I glance down at my naked body, but don't have time to even open my mouth before Noah is opening one of his dresser drawers and whipping out a T-shirt. He steps in close to me and pulls it over my head, leaning in to kiss me on the end of my nose as he drags the fabric down my body. It's another sweetly clichéd moment I never would have expected to experience, let alone enjoy.

But I do.

Once I'm covered, Noah snags a fresh pair of shorts, pulling them on before grabbing my hand and leading me out of the room. I'm a little surprised when he opens the door catty corner across the hall, flipping on the light before dragging me inside.

I stop the second my feet hit the carpet, staring at the sight in front of me. "What in the hell?"

The room is lined with bookcases and each one is packed full of books. They're filling the shelves. They're stacked on top. They're piled on the floor.

There are literally books everywhere.

I step to one of the shelves, running the tips of my fingers across the spines of an antique looking complete set of the works of Jane Austen. On the shelf above them is a line of Mark Twain hardbacks, butting right up to more Nancy Drew books than I've ever seen in one place. "Holy shit, Noah." I'm a little afraid to touch too much. "These have to be worth a fortune."

Noah grins wide, eyes bright as he watches my face. "Probably."

I scoff, turning to face him. "*This* is what I'm supposed to find horrifying and disgusting?"

His smile widens. "If you're not disgusted then you haven't looked hard enough."

I purse my lips, intrigued. "What am I looking for?" I refocus on the shelves, scanning everything from Harlequin reds from the 1980s to more recent Nora Roberts' prints.

Then I see them.

“You’re freaking kidding.” I go straight to the shelf and snag one of the offensive books free, flipping it toward him. “You better start explaining why you have an entire collection of Nicolas Sparks novels or I’m taking back all the nice things I’ve said about you.”

Noah doesn’t stop smiling as he comes my way. “Remind me what those nice things were.”

I shake my head. “Not until you explain this bullshit.”

Noah rests one hand against the center of his chest. “My grandmother would be hurt that you called her prized book collection bullshit.”

My eyes go back to the shelves, scanning the books filling the room. “These were your grandmother’s books?”

He nods. “Most of them. Some are mine.”

“Most?” I can’t help but look a little closer as I slide the book back into place, feeling slightly less hateful toward it since it belonged to his grandmother. “Which ones are yours?”

Noah’s smile twists into a teasing line. “You have to guess.”

There’s got to be thousands of books in this room. It would take me hours to even look at all of them. “Can you give me a hint?”

Noah comes closer, the look on his face intense as his eyes hold mine. “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate.” His voice is soft, the line from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 sliding off his tongue in a way that sounds like pure sex and suggestion.

I lick my lips, turned on by more than just the words he said. “No one’s ever accused me of being temperate before.”

Noah’s finger comes to trace along my face. “Good. I don’t like temperate women.”

“If you’re trying to flatter me, it’s working.” I know I’m a handful, and even though there are things I’m starting to

realize I want to change about myself, that isn't one of them.

Noah opens his mouth, but the distant sound of my ringing cell phone cuts him off.

“Ignore that.” I step closer to him. “Tell me more about how intemperate I am.”

Noah glances over his shoulder as the soft chiming continues. “I don't think we should ignore that.” His expression tightens. “What if it's Detective Wentz or Mr. Rigellio?”

“Ugh.” I groan, but he's right. “I'm so tired of all this.” I step around him, leaving behind the room I can't wait to explore, to go to where my purse still sits on the kitchen counter.

I fish out my cell just as it stops ringing. The missed call bubble pops up and the name it displays sends my stomach sinking to my toes. “It was Elana.”

Noah is already right beside me, looking positively delectable in all his shirtless glory. “You call her back. I'll finish making us dinner.”

I run my fingers across his middle, unable to resist sneaking a little touch of his skin. I love the combination of hard and soft there. I can only imagine how comfortable he would be to curl up against.

Maybe I'll find out tonight.

I drag my hand away and pull up Elana's number, pressing the phone to my ear as I wander over to Barnaby's cage. The second I get close, he lunges, jumping right to my shoulder in a flappy move that makes me yelp.

“Jillian?”

I can barely hear Elana over the sound of Barnaby's continued flaps and loud squawks. “Elana? Hang on.” I hold the phone away, giving the bird a glare. “Shut up. I'm on the phone.”

He lets out another sound that's almost a bark, but then clamps his beak shut.

I put the cell back against my ear. “Sorry. Noah’s bird is being an asshole.”

Elana sniffs. “It’s okay.”

I go still at the sound of her voice. Something’s off. “What’s wrong?”

She sniffs again, louder this time and when she answers her voice wavers. “I’m just a little worried.”

I turn to Noah, meeting his eyes across the kitchen island. “Worried about what?”

Another snuffle, followed by a shaky breath. “I think I saw Austin drive past.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“You really don’t have to do this.” Jillian buckles up her seatbelt as I back out of the garage, being careful to keep space between my Jeep and where her sedan now sits in the other half of the space. “I could have gone by myself.”

“If you think I’m going to sit at home while you and your friend deal with that asshole alone, then you have lost your mind.” I can’t stop the anger creeping into my voice.

After hanging up the call with Elana, her employee and from the sound of it, close friend, Jillian filled me in on what I’m assuming is only part of the back story involving Elana’s ex-husband, and my blood pressure has only continued to rise since.

“We’ve done it before. We can do it again.”

I turn to stare at her as I stop in the middle of the driveway. “What do you mean, you’ve done it before?”

Jillian hesitates, pressing her lips together as she holds my gaze. “I might be the one who helped her get away from him.”

The admission doesn’t surprise me.

Jillian works hard to maintain a cool, detached exterior, but it’s starting to become clear that’s all smoke and mirrors.

I was suspicious that was the case before, but after seeing her connection with Mr. Rigellio and now finding out the lengths she’s gone to for her friend, I’m positive Jillian isn’t what she wants people to believe she is.

But the discovery doesn't make me as happy as it would have now that I know it's the reason she's put herself between a man that's proven he's capable of violence and the woman he obviously still believes belongs to him.

"That's what the police are for, Jillian." I back out of the driveway and onto the street, following the directions displayed across the screen in my console. "They are who she should be calling now."

Jillian's jaw sets. "She did. They told her the video she took of his car was too blurry to prove it was him." Her chin lifts. "That's why she called me."

I shake my head a little, sure I didn't understand correctly. "The police wouldn't do anything?" From what Jillian said, there's a protection order in place. One that says this guy's not allowed anywhere near Elana. "They should have arrested him. He violated a court order."

Jillian slumps down a little in her seat. "I wish it was that easy." She wipes at the corner of one eye, blinking a few times in a move that does nothing to hide how exhausted she is. "But it's not. They even have a report from some woman he was dating saying he drove her past Elana's apartment to show her where she lived, and they didn't do shit. We only know it happened because she came into the shop to tell us when it was clear the cops weren't going to do anything."

I rub one hand down my face, suddenly feeling my own exhaustion. "How is that possible?"

Jillian shrugs, looking small, the way she did when she told me about her dad. "It's a man's world. Women should just be lucky we get to live in it."

A week ago I might've argued with her. Might've believed she was wrong. But being with Jillian, hearing about how her dad walked away without a second thought, witnessing the way Detective Wentz seemed unfazed at the possibility that a jaded lover destroyed her apartment, and now seeing the way Elana isn't being protected by the system, I'm realizing that maybe she's at least a little right.

And it's frustrating as hell.

"Okay, so what's our plan then?" I grip the wheel, doing everything I can to not let my frustration show.

"Now we just stay with her and make sure he doesn't do anything." Jillian shrugs. "Usually we just pile up on the couch, watch movies, and wait it out."

The steering wheel creaks as my grip tightens. "What do you mean, *usually*?"

Jillian's eyes come my way. "This isn't the first time this has happened, Noah."

I force a slow breath into my lungs then let it out. "He's done this before?"

What in the hell is wrong with this guy? I get that sometimes it can be hard to let go of someone you love, but this doesn't seem like love. This seems like something very different. Something darker. Something scarier.

"It's not just him, Noah." Jillian's voice is soft. "I've known a lot of women that have gone through something like this."

I rake one hand through my hair, fighting the sudden urge to punch something. To dish out well-deserved punishment. "Has this happened to you?"

Jillian shrugs again, but I don't understand why. This isn't something she should just dismiss. "Not this exact situation, but I've encountered my share of men that didn't want to take no for an answer." Her lips press into a flat line. "Men who followed me out of a bar after I told them I wasn't interested and thought the best way to convince me I was wrong was in a dark parking lot." She closes her eyes. "Men who called me terrible things when I rejected them." Her eyes open and meet mine. "I don't know a woman who doesn't have a story like that."

I stare out the windshield because what the hell else can I do? I could try to apologize for the awfulness of my gender, but honestly right now I don't want to feel like I represent

them. I don't. I know a lot of us don't, but that doesn't change anything. And unfortunately, I'm not sure what will.

I'm silent the rest of the drive, gritting my teeth together as I strangle my steering wheel, frustrated and angry over my blindness to the situations women face. I knew it happened, I just didn't really realize how often. And I'm a little embarrassed by my naivety.

"You look mad." Jillian sounds a little confused and it pulls my attention her way as we wait to turn into Elana's apartment complex.

"I am mad." I don't know what else to say. I'm not even sure I have the right to be mad. None of this has happened to me.

But Jillian gives me a little smile and the sweetness of her expression eases some of the tension in my chest. "Thank you."

I snort. "I'm not sure what you're thanking me for."

"For realizing it's bullshit that women have to deal with this." Her smile lifts a little more. "And for not being like that."

"You shouldn't have to thank me for not being an asshole who would follow you into a dark parking lot or drive past your house at night."

She shakes her head. "I shouldn't, but that's how it is."

I reach across the seats, snagging her hand and lacing my fingers with hers. "I promise to pay more attention. To do everything I can to put assholes like Austin in their place." I know it's not much, but it's the best I can offer. And at least it's something.

It seems to satisfy Jillian and she layers her other hand onto the back of mine, palms soft against my skin. "Hopefully you won't have to deal with that tonight."

"I don't know." I work hard to keep from squeezing her hand too tight. "I might feel a whole hell of a lot better if I got to square up with Austin."

It's been a stressful few days and this might push me over the edge. Right now I want to either be on a treadmill, running so fast I can't think of anything else, or planting my fist right in the center of this guy Austin's face for scaring his ex-wife the way he has.

Jillian directs me to the unit that belongs to Elana and I park, helping her out before following her to the front door. Elana opens the door a crack, eyes moving to the area behind us before she widens it and lets us in.

Her apartment is two stories, with a large living room area at the front and a hall leading to a dining room/kitchen combo. A half-bath sits in the middle, with what I'm guessing is a utility closet across the hall. I've lived in similar places before, but my apartments were never as homey and well decorated as Elana's is.

Framed paintings hang on the walls and coordinated throw pillows are strategically placed across the sofas. A collection of items are artfully arranged across a chunky coffee table and a thick area rug covers the laminate flooring.

Normally I would compliment her on her home, but right now that feels out of place.

Elana locks the door, peeking out through the blinds of the front window before turning to face us. "You really didn't have to come all the way over here."

"Of course we did." Jillian grabs her friend in a tight hug. "I told you to call me any time and I would be here, and I meant it."

Elana hugs Jillian back, her gaze wary as it comes to me. I probably still look pissed as hell, but I'm not sure I can wipe the expression off my face, so I settle for making her the same offer Jillian did. "That goes for me too. Jillian will give you my number. Call me anytime."

What's happening isn't right. A woman shouldn't be scared in her own home. She shouldn't live in fear because she moved on and walked away from an unhealthy relationship.

She shouldn't have to fight to protect her daughter from someone capable of physical violence.

"Miss Jillian." A high-pitched voice accompanies the thunderous sound of feet coming down stairs. I turn to find a little girl racing our way, arms outstretched, a book clutched in one hand. She launches her little body at Jillian, the force knocking her back a step as they collide.

Jillian swings the small girl up in a tight hug. "How are you?" She leans back, looking the little girl over. "I heard you're getting really close to being able to read all the books in my store."

The little girl wiggles down, holding up the thin paperback clutched in her hand the second her feet are on the floor. "I can read this one all by myself."

Jillian takes the book, flipping through the pages before handing it back. "That is amazing." She crouches down, putting herself eye-to-eye with Elana's daughter. "It sounds like I need to order you some books for my shop."

The little girl gives her an exaggerated nod. "Yup."

Jillian sits on the couch and the little girl immediately climbs right up at her side, snuggling close as she opens her book and starts to read, proving her claim in carefully sounded-out words.

Elana watches, a small smile barely softening the lines of weariness creasing her expression.

"She's cute." I'm not sure what else to say. I'm not extremely experienced with kids. Old people, yes. Young people, no. "How old is she?"

Elana's shoulders stay bunched tight as she crosses both arms over her chest. "Six." She leans a little closer to me. "Her name's Bella. She's awesome."

I can't possibly imagine what it's like to have a kid, so all I can do is believe her claim. "She seems like it."

I glance at the door, almost like I expect the dick terrorizing this woman and her daughter to bust right through.

An angry part of me wishes he would so I can make it clear his presence is unwelcome, but I know that wouldn't be something little Bella needs to witness. "What can I do?"

I feel completely helpless and entirely clueless. I'm the only one here who's never been in a situation like this before. The only one who doesn't understand what it's like to be afraid of a group of people it's impossible to avoid.

Elana gives me another small smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "You can just hang out. We usually just wait and make sure nothing else happens."

The fact that they have to wait here and hope it doesn't escalate doesn't sit right. I glance at Bella, keeping my voice low enough she can't hear. "Why don't you move so he doesn't know where you live?"

Elana meets my gaze. "I have moved. More than once." She shakes her head. "That doesn't work."

I know Sweet Side isn't the biggest city in the world, but it's decently sized. Certainly large enough that it should be relatively easy for her to find a new place where her ex won't find her. "How does he figure out where you live?"

Elana turns to where her daughter sits on the couch with Jillian, her eyes lingering over the little girl. "I'm still required to tell him where Bella goes to school and it's easy enough to narrow down the apartment complexes in that district." Her focus comes back my way. "Then it's just a matter of driving around until he sees my car parked."

The reality hits me like a load of wet cement—heavy and inescapable as it smothers out the blissful air of ignorance I've been able to breathe for so long. Elana can't move continuously. She can't change cars. She can't change jobs. She's unable to disappear because legally he still has certain rights to their daughter's information and whereabouts.

She's stuck. A sitting duck waiting to be targeted by a man who's hurt her once and clearly itches to have the opportunity to do it again.

“I think I need to take a walk.” I may not know a lot about small people, but I do know that losing my shit right here in front of Bella would be a bad thing. I move to the door, turning to Jillian before I open it. “Call me if you need me. I won’t go far.”

I unlock the door and step out, waiting until Elana locks it behind me before I start walking.

Unfortunately, walking doesn’t help, so I move to a jog which quickly turns to a run. Before I realize it I’m sprinting around the circular lot, racing along the collection of buildings that make up Elana’s complex. I keep doing laps, taking my anger out on the pavement since I can’t take it out on Austin’s face.

I’m on my third lap when my phone starts to vibrate in my pocket. I skid to a stop and pull it out, connecting Jillian’s call as my eyes scan the lot. “You guys okay?”

“He’s out there. I see his car.”

I spin in place. “What does it look like?”

“It’s black. Tinted windows. Four doors.”

I scan the area around me for any sign of the vehicle she’s describing. “Where is it?”

“He’s just pulling in. He drove up the backside first and now he’s circling to the front.”

I turn just as headlights cut across the entrance to the shared lot. The black sedan I’m looking for creeps along, moving toward Elana’s building. I take off at a full run, adrenaline pumping, the need to right a few wrongs pushing me faster.

I’m the length of a football field away when the black sedan closes in on Elana’s apartment. The driver’s door opens and a man starts to get out.

“*Hey.*” I push my body harder, grateful for the years of stress and worry that made it into what it is. “Don’t even fucking think about it.”

Austin stops, shoots a quick glance at me over one shoulder before falling back into his seat and peeling out of the lot, door closing as he drives away. I continue chasing him, like I might be able to catch a vehicle on foot.

But there's no way.

I stop, more pissed off now than I was when I walked outside. "*Coward.*" I scream across the lot as he turns onto the main road, tires squealing as they try to maintain traction.

I brace both hands on my hips, sucking in lungfuls of air as his taillights disappear into the night. I drop my head back. "Fuck."

"So, I get that you're upset, but this is a family-friendly neighborhood." Jillian's voice is close and sends me spinning around to find her, along with Elana and Bella, standing in the open door of Elana's home.

I point at their apartment, fed up. "Pack your stuff. We're leaving."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

JILLIAN

“YOU REALLY DIDN’T have to—”

Noah’s eyes snap Elana’s way and she seals her lips together, cutting off her latest attempt to convince Noah her problems are his problems.

She’s tried apologizing. Tried explaining that Noah really didn’t have to bring her and Bella to his house, but he’s not having any of it.

Because of course he isn’t.

“This is going to be like camping.” Bella is the only one of us who doesn’t seem bothered by the events of the evening, which is a testament to how well Elana has shielded her daughter. She sits on the floor of Noah’s book room, watching as he inflates an air mattress across the open floor. “Is that why you have this balloon bed, Mr. Noah? Because you go camping?”

“I have this because I got to Florida before my furniture did and I needed a place to sleep.” Noah pushes down on the top of the king-sized bed before continuing to fill it with the air pump in his hand. “It’s a good thing I kept it, huh?”

Bella nods, pressing her little hand into the mattress just like Noah did. “Yup.”

I know Elana feels like she’s putting Noah out, but right now I’m more relieved than I would ever admit to her. I’m exhausted, and while I absolutely would have stayed up all night with her, I’m thrilled that I won’t have to. Almost as thrilled as I am that she and Bella will be safe.

Even if they will be surrounded by Nicholas Sparks books.

Noah finishes filling the mattress and he and Bella work together to put on a set of sheets and a pile of pillows, adding on a thick blanket before calling it finished. Bella immediately flops down, wiggling under the covers before opening up the book she's carried around all night.

"Do you want some other books to read?" Noah goes to one of the shelves, crouching down to scan the bottom section. "I have some of mine from when I was your age."

Bella sits up. "You do?"

Noah nods, pulling out a selection of cardboard style children's stories. He stacks them up on the floor beside the mattress. "I used to read these all the time."

Bella grabs the stack, hauling the whole thing onto the mattress. "Thank you, Mr. Noah."

Noah smiles, looking like he isn't about to find someone to murder for the first time since we left for Elana's apartment. "You're welcome." He stands up, moving out into the hallway where Elana and I have been watching. He points to the door directly across the hall. "The bathroom's right there. There's all kinds of food in the kitchen and the wireless password is fancyrabbit216." He turns to me. "Am I forgetting anything?"

I'm not sure why he's asking me. I don't live here.

But now that I think about it, I do have something to add. "Barnaby is kind of a cusser, so Bella might learn a few new words while she's here."

Elana's brows lift. "Barnaby?"

Noah's cockatoo had been shockingly quiet as we came in, lugging bags and tablets and cell phones and toys, so it doesn't surprise me that my friend didn't notice him. "He's a bird. He's out in the kitchen, so brace yourself if you go in there."

Elana barely smiles. "Got it." Her eyes lift to Noah. "Thank you again for this." She glances into where her daughter is already working through the first of his books. "It means a lot to me."

Noah's murderous expression is back again, but his tone is gentle when he responds. "You're welcome to stay here for as long as you want. You deserve to feel safe."

Elana glances back toward Bella and then steps closer to Noah. "If I stay here too long there's a chance Austin will find me, and I'm not sure he will care that this isn't my house."

Noah's lips shift into an expression that isn't a smile but almost looks happy. "Good."

If I hadn't already been strongly contemplating having sex with Noah, tonight's events would have absolutely pushed me over that hump. Between his anger at what Elana's had to deal with and the immediate way he stepped up to keep her and Bella safe, the man is lucky I'm not dragging him to the bedroom right now.

"Mommy." Bella waves around the book in her hands. "Come listen to me read."

Elana gives her daughter a warm smile. "I'll be right there, sweetheart." She turns back to us, grabbing me in a tight hug before facing Noah. He seems shocked when she does the same to him, but eventually pats her on the back.

She gives us a little wave. "Good night." Then she ducks into the room, quietly closing the door behind her.

Noah scrubs both hands over his face before digging his fingers into his hair. "This is fucking crazy."

I grab the front of his shirt, pulling him down the hall. "You're right."

"The police should be able to do something about this." He lets me drag him along, seemingly oblivious to the fact that I'm hauling him straight into the bedroom. "She shouldn't have to go through this."

"Right again." I flip on the light, dragging him into the room before closing and locking the door behind us. I move close, bracing my hands against his chest as I shove him backward. "It's a good thing she has someone like you around." The second his legs bump the bed I give him another

shove, knocking him down to the mattress before crawling on top of his body. “Now she won’t have to be scared all night.”

Noah helping me was one thing. The sweet way he took care of me, first when I fell into his hot tub and then during the craziness at Mauricio’s office, started to slowly wedge him under my skin. But watching him do the same thing for my friend and her daughter?

Having him under my skin is not quite the sort of penetration that made me want.

Noah goes very still as I settle my body over his. “What are you doing, Jillian?”

“I was thinking we could pick up where we left off earlier.” I wiggle a little, rubbing against him in a way that makes my meaning clear. After Elana called, I quickly pulled on the dress I wore earlier today so there’s very little keeping his body from mine. “Maybe relieve a little stress.”

Noah doesn’t immediately take me up on my offer, once again proving he’s not at all what I’ve always thought men to be. “Is that the only reason you want to do this? To relieve stress?”

I’m a little disappointed he’s giving me a hard time about this. Disappointed, but not surprised.

I push my lower lip out, trying to look pouty instead of bitchy, but I’m not sure if that’s something I can accomplish. “Is that not a good reason to have sex?”

He slowly shakes his head at me, gaze intense. “Not this time.”

I’m not an overly emotional person. I prefer to manage my feelings internally rather than spread them around for the whole world to witness.

Unless I’m pissed. Anger, I am more than happy to spill everywhere.

Anger is useful. Anger lets people know not to fuck with me. That I won’t tolerate their bullshit.

But Noah doesn't want anger, and honestly right now I don't feel it. Not toward him. I haven't in a surprisingly long period of time.

Long for me.

I push up, using his chest for leverage as I straddle his hips, knees pressing into the mattress at each side of his body. "We can't just have crazy sex today and then maybe discuss it tomorrow?" I know he's not going to go for it, but I can't stop myself from pitching the idea. I've gone my whole life without having meaningful sex, and now that I'm staring it down, I'm caught between excitement and terror.

Noah huffs out a little laugh. "No. We cannot do that."

I drop my head back on a groan. "Ugh. I have never worked so hard to get laid."

"That doesn't surprise me." Noah's hands finally come to rest against my bare thighs, slowly sliding higher as they stroke over my skin. "But I have to play a little hard to get, otherwise you'll think I'm easy."

Now it's my turn to laugh, rolling my eyes at how he's turned the tables on a social standard that always chapped my ass. "Fine. If it will keep you from worrying that I think you're a whore." I smooth my hands across his chest, toying with the fabric of his shirt as I dig around for something to say. An explanation for the attachment I'm accidentally starting to feel toward him. "I want to have sex with you because I'm happy you don't suck the way I expected you to."

Noah lifts one dark brow. "You are terrible at this."

I lightly slap the center of his chest. "Shut up. This is new for me." I stroke across the spot I smacked because I already feel guilty about the little hit. "I'm more of a wham, bam, thank you, sir, kind of girl."

"That surprises me." He catches my wrists and pulls me closer. "I wouldn't have expected you to say thank you."

I want to be angry he's calling me out, but the grin on Noah's face makes it impossible to scrounge up any upset.

Especially when he rolls us across the bed, pinning my body under his.

I lace my arms around his neck, leaning up to barely touch my lips to his. “I’m guessing this means no wham bam.”

He shakes his head, smile holding. “No wham bam.”

I pout again, keeping my mouth barely against his. “Can I at least get the bam part?”

Noah chuckles, and I’m surprised at how much I like hearing the sound. How much lighter it makes me feel after an evening of smothering weight. “You’re hard to say no to, you know that?”

I hook one leg around his, lining our bodies up in a way that makes it difficult to miss an interesting development. “You’re just hard.”

Noah slides his nose alongside mine, eyes dark as he rocks into me, proving just how hard he currently is. “I think maybe I like that you seem to be having fun with me.”

I curl my fingers in his hair, fisting the thick strands as he rocks against me again. “If you tell anyone I’ll kill you and make it look like an accident.”

Noah’s eyes lock onto mine. “I would never tell anyone about our time together, Jillian.” His hips thrust, dragging his cock along my pussy in a way that makes me gasp. “I’m not sharing this part of you with anyone.”

I swallow hard, surprised at the possessiveness in his tone. Even more surprised at how much I like it. Enough to dig for a little more. “You’re not going to be so excited that you finally got fully laid that you tell all your friends?”

“What happens in this bed is no one’s business but ours.” Noah grinds into me another time, making me really regret that I didn’t strip all our clothes off the second we came into this room. “I can’t tell anyone anyway. They’d be so jealous they wouldn’t be able to stand it.”

“I know the women would.” I gasp as he pulls away, fingers hooking into the waistband of my panties to drag them

along as he goes.

Noah tosses my underwear away before reaching for his nightstand, pulling out an unopened box of condoms and scanning the side as he shoves down his shorts with his free hand, revealing the solid line of his fully-erect dick.

“The application process is pretty simple.” I start to reach for his cock but then realize that might not be the smartest use of my efforts.

Noah gets off on me getting off, and what first felt like a little bit of a limiting factor now seems like an opportunity I can use for both our benefits. I slide the hand I initially planned to use on him between my thighs, teasing my fingers across my heated and aching skin, pressing deeper as I wait for him to notice what I’m up to.

It doesn’t take long.

Noah’s eyes flick to me, going back to the box before snapping my way again in a double take that might have given him whiplash. His focus zeroes in on where I’m touching myself, holding a second before he grips the box with both hands, digging his fingers into the cardboard before ripping it in half. Condoms go flying everywhere, raining down onto the bed around me.

I cackle out a laugh, picking up a strip from where it landed across my stomach. “I think you dropped this.”

Noah snags it away and sits back on his heels, spreading my legs wide as he stares down at me. “Don’t stop what you’re doing.”

The hint of bossiness in his tone sends a little thrill through me. Not because I like being told what to do. I don’t. But maybe I don’t mind it so much in certain situations.

Or just with certain people.

I lift the hem of the dress I’m still wearing higher, pushing it up past my belly while my hand goes back to my clit, fingers working it as Noah watches, completely focused on me as he tears open one of the condoms and rolls it down his solid

length. Once the rubber is in place his eyes lift to mine. “Is that what you need to come while I fuck you? To be touched?”

Nothing should surprise me about him at this moment, but the question still does. I’ve always assumed open communication during sex was the unicorn of the intimate world. A fictional pipe dream that never really existed.

But maybe I’ve just been looking in the wrong places. Or, equally likely, I scared the unicorns into hiding their true selves.

I nod. “But I can take care of that part.”

Noah grabs my hand, pulling it from my body. “No fucking way do you get to take that from me.”

I don’t have time to gasp at his words before Noah lifts one of my legs, hooking the heel over his shoulder as he drags his cock along my slit, teasing it across my clit before notching it into place.

Then he sinks deep, filling me in one, smooth thrust that rolls my eyes back in my head. “Holy sh—”

Noah’s free hand comes to clamp over my mouth. “Gotta be quiet, Jilly Bean. Don’t forget we’ve got company.” His hand stays in place as he presses into me again. This time I manage to keep my response to a whimper behind the warmth of his palm. “Good girl.” He pulls his hand away, dragging it down my body. “Stay quiet or we’ll have to stop.”

The threat is enough to make me seal my lips together, pressing them tighter when his thumb settles onto my clit.

I’ve never been one to lie back and take a fucking, especially since I’ve never trusted a man to pull his own weight, but right now it’s taking everything I have just to keep my mouth shut. I couldn’t participate even if I needed to.

Which is probably Noah’s whole goal.

The realization reminds me to open my eyes. To watch his face so I can see his reaction instead of drowning in my own. Our eyes lock and he holds my gaze, this connection somehow feeling infinitely more intimate than where his body penetrates

mine. Now I can witness every clench of his jaw. Every flare of his nostrils. Every grit of his teeth.

Seeing Noah's reaction makes me understand his position on the 'your pleasure is my pleasure' thing, because the fact that he's so clearly enjoying this makes me enjoy it more, pushing me right to the edge in a matter of minutes.

When his palm presses down on my belly, causing his cock to drag across the magical spot inside me, I come, the climax snapping through me without warning.

When I'm the one controlling my satisfaction, I know a climax is coming. There's a certain expected process and all I have to do is follow the required steps. Up until I met Noah, I'd been the catalyst for every orgasm I'd experienced. Now they all just slam into me out of nowhere, hitting harder than a linebacker as they take me down and out.

I'm so wrapped up in my own bliss that I almost miss Noah's, his hushed grunt and the slightly harder thrust of his hips catching my attention just in time.

I stare at his face, our eyes once again linked, watching as he finally claims what he happily offers me. The moment is surreal and intense and intimate and it tells me two very important things.

Noah is sexy as hell when he comes.

And I am as fucked as fucked gets.

CHAPTER TWENTY

NOAH

I ROLL OVER in bed, slinging my arm across the mattress, expecting to grab Jillian and pull her closer to me. Unfortunately, I find nothing but empty blankets and cool mattress.

I sit up, scrubbing one hand over my face as I blink away the exhaustion that kept me asleep longer than normal. I usually wake up without an alarm, but last night was rough.

It was also fucking amazing.

I'm not sure how I could experience the best and worst life has to offer in the same twenty-four hour period, but somehow I managed. And I'm definitely feeling the effects this morning.

I drag my ass out of bed and into the shower, scrubbing off, brushing my teeth, and putting in my contacts before dressing and going out into the hallway. The door to the book room is open and the bed inside is neatly made, indicating I'm the only one who had a hard time getting up this morning. The sound of happy voices carries in from the kitchen and I follow them, finding the three women I've brought into my home making breakfast together. Standing on a chair shoved against the stove, Bella stirs a large skillet of eggs while her mom chops through the supply of fruit I keep on hand for both me and Barnaby.

Barnaby is out of his cage, perched on its top as Jillian fills his bowl with a fresh batch of fruit, talking to him in sweet, hushed tones as she gently strokes down his back.

And the bird is fucking eating it up. Barnaby is usually loud and aggressive and annoying, but right now he's acting like he's so sweet he might melt in the rain. I'd be irritated if I wasn't so happy to see how much he already adores Jillian.

Happy, and unsurprised. They both might be sneaky sweethearts. Two birds of a feather. One of them literally.

Jillian notices me first, giving me a big smile as her eyes meet mine. "Good morning." She abandons Barnaby to come my way. "I hope you don't mind. We raided your refrigerator."

I snag her the second she's close enough to reach, pulling her against me and pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I don't mind at all." I give Bella a wink over Jillian's head. "As long as you share."

Jillian carefully extricates herself from my hold, eyes dropping mine as she steps away. "I guess we might have enough for you."

Her words are still teasing, but the way she pulled out of my arms has my mind running to places I didn't think I would need to go again.

I am so fucking stupid. I know I get attached way faster than the average person. I know I get too comfortable too fast. I thought I was doing better, but last night must have put me right back where I started. Back to being ready to jump in with both feet when anyone else would still be dipping their toe to check the temperature.

"I'm going to go start some laundry." I turn on my heel and duck out of the room, embarrassed, frustrated, and angry. I close myself into the laundry room and grab the load of towels waiting to go in, stuffing them down into the drum of the washer as I continue to beat myself up.

I should've known I would ruin this. I cleared one hurdle last night and now I think I can run, but obviously that's not true. Obviously there are still plenty I need to jump, and the thought is depressing as hell.

I don't want to ruin this with Jillian. The smile she gave me this morning made me feel like I could do anything. Made

me feel like I am as right for her as I believe I am.

But now—

There's a soft knock at the door before it opens. Jillian sticks her head in. "Hey." She glances back out before sliding her whole body through the tiniest gap possible, silently closing the door behind her.

Then she runs at me, lacing both arms around my neck as she presses her lips to mine.

My relief is intense and immediate. I wrap my arms around her and lift her, sliding her butt onto the dryer, curving my hands around her face as my tongue slicks against hers. She laces her legs around my waist, pulling me close as her mouth barely breaks away. "It was so hard not to make out with you in the kitchen." One hand trails down my front. "I just don't want to make Elana feel bad about her whole situation by having to stare at us being all happy and lovey-dovey."

I relax a little more, leaning back in for another kiss as her words finish registering. I pull away. "Did you just say lovey-dovey?"

"Absolutely not. And if you tell anyone I did, I will call you a liar." Jillian grips my shirt and pulls me in again, her kiss hard and demanding.

I run my hands down her arms. Along her legs. Over her belly. When they reach her tits, I curve them around the soft swells, finding her nipples through the fabric of her T-shirt and rolling them between my fingers and thumbs.

Jillian immediately moans, the sound passing from her mouth to mine.

Then she starts slapping my hands. "We've got to stop." She pushes at my chest, shoving me away before sliding to the floor. "No making out in the laundry room while they're three feet away."

"They're more than three feet away." I step in behind her, bringing my lips to the shell of her ear. "And we did way more than that last night with them right across the hall."

Jillian straightens her red and white striped T-shirt, re-tucking it into her jean shorts. “That was different. That was at night.” She turns to face me, smoothing down her hair as she wiggles her brows. “And it will be night again soon enough.”

“What if I don’t want to wait for night?” I’ve gone from celibate to greedy as fuck in the blink of an eye, and I don’t feel bad about it at all. I knew I could be what Jillian needed, but now that I see she offers me the same understanding and acceptance?

It’s going to be hell to keep my hands off her.

Jillian straightens her glasses, lifting her chin a little. “Then you’ll just have to hope I sneak my way over to your gym today so I can see if your desk is as comfortable to sit on as it looks like it is.” She gives me a quick wink before spinning away and sliding out of the room, leaving me turned on and panting.

And smiling like an idiot.

I’m still smiling forty-five minutes later when I pull up in front of my gym and Jillian’s bookstore. Jillian insisted on going with Elana to drop Bella off at school, just to be safe. I offered to go, but both women assured me it wasn’t necessary. I’m not sure I agree, but I can only strong-arm them so much.

And I’m hoping it will help smooth over my next move.

I grab my bag and head into the gym, nodding at Jesse as I pass the front desk. He jumps up from his seat and jogs at my side. “Blake’s in your office. Said you asked him to come by.”

“He is correct.” I glance around the floor, taking stock of all the trainers and clients filling the space. “Is Sylvia coming back today with her group?”

Jesse chuckles, shaking his head as he walks beside me. “They’re scheduled for one o’clock. Said they don’t like to get out of bed too early.”

“Make sure you come get me when they get here. I want to say hi.”

I'm not one hundred percent positive, but I almost think my interactions with Sylvia might have put the first crack in Jillian's hard facade, and I will never stop being grateful to her for that.

Even if she and her friends do fill their bottles with liquor instead of water.

Jesse gives me a quick nod. "Will do."

He steps away as I walk into my office, greeting Blake with a smile. "Thanks for coming in." I set my bag down. "I wanted to see when you might have time to install cameras at another residence."

Blake is leaned back in his seat, looking relaxed and comfortable as he sips from the foam cup of coffee in his hand. "Probably a couple weeks. Is it for your place?"

I shake my head as I drop down into my chair. "It's for Elana, Jillian's employee." I flip open my laptop. "Her ex-husband has been stalking her and I want her to feel a little safer in her apartment."

Blake shifts around, straightening in the chair. "I might be able to swing by there after I finish my jobs for the day." He works his jaw from side to side, expression hardening. "She call the cops?"

"Yup. They said without proof they couldn't do anything because the video she had was too blurry." I rake one hand through my hair, my frustration from last night working its way back under my skin. "I get that they don't want to arrest someone innocent, but the guy has already put his hands on her at least once that I know of. It's not a fucking stretch to believe he'd be driving past her apartment."

"Where's she live?"

I offer up the name of Elana's apartment complex and the general area of its location. "She's staying at my place right now, but I know that's not a long-term solution. She and her daughter need their own space. That's why I called you."

They deserve to be able to sleep in their own beds instead of on an air mattress. And if I can help make that possible, it's

a no-brainer for me.

“I know exactly where that complex is.” Blake pulls out his cell phone, glancing at the time before standing up. “Text me her address and let her know that I’ll be there at six o’clock.”

I stand up, reaching out to shake his hand. “Thanks, man. I appreciate you squeezing this in. Send the bill to me.”

Blake meets my gaze. “There’s no bill for this.”

I want to argue with him, but I’ve known Blake long enough to understand right now we both feel the same way.

Like we need to figure out a way to do something about this. A way to help women like Elana live without fear. A way to rein in the bad behaviors of our gender and put them in their place.

Unfortunately, that’s easier said than done.

After Blake leaves, I go back to my computer, finishing up an order I started last week, but this time I actually place it. Then I go out to meet with my clients, working through my morning sessions, keeping an eye on the parking lot for any sign of the black sedan I chased last night.

When lunchtime rolls around I’m more than ready to check in next door. I quickly place a DoorDash order, set it to be delivered to Jillian’s bookshop, and jog outside and down the sidewalk. I walk in to find Jillian and Elana juggling a storeful of customers. Jillian’s at the register while Elana tries to help everyone find the books they’re seeking.

I’ve never paid particularly close attention to the number of people frequenting Jillian’s store, but from what I’m seeing now, it looks like she’s doing decently good business. Decent enough that I can see why she doesn’t want to move. I know how hard it can be to get customers used to a new location, and how many choose not to follow at all.

I don’t want her to have to deal with that, which means I need to figure out a way to get in touch with Mauricio. Figure out what that letter he sent was all about and convince him Jillian needs to stay.

As long as he's still alive.

It's one more issue I can't do much about at this moment, so I decide to tackle something I can and join Jillian behind the counter. I don't know how to check people out so I start helping bag up the orders. I'm unsurprised to discover that books aren't the only thing Jillian's moving here at Spicy Stacks. Suddenly the variety of sexual aides that were scattered across her bedroom floor make a lot more sense.

I don't look too hard at any of the items as I add them to bags, passing them back across the counter like I've been selling vibrators for years.

But one in particular does catch my eye.

We finish ringing out everyone in line and the shop clears out just as our lunch arrives. Jillian sends Elana back to eat first, giving me an opportunity I wasn't sure would come up. I wait until her friend is in the break room, digging into the food, before I lean down to snag the item that interests me.

I slide it onto the counter and pull out my wallet. "I'd like to make a purchase."

Jillian's dark eyes move over the box before sliding to me. "Interesting choice."

"That better be sarcasm." I pass over my credit card.

Her lips twist into a wry smile. "I'm a little irritated at how fast you've figured me out."

"Good." I take the box after she scans it and drop it into one of the bags stamped with her store's logo. "I like you when you're irritated."

Her lips purse as she scans my card and passes me the receipt. "Jerk." She tries to press out a smile, but it manages to creep through.

I like that she's teasing me, but I like more that she's struggling to keep a smile off her face.

I lean in close, brushing my lips across her ear. "You don't mean that."

“If you get me all hot and bothered right now I’ll kill you.” She’s arguing but still leans closer, like she can’t help but want more of my touch. “And I know where you live.”

“You act like I would leave you to suffer.” I catch the lobe of her ear between my teeth and give it a little nip. “All you have to do is come next door and I’ll be happy to take care of any issues you’re having.”

I can’t get the thought of Jillian spread across my desk out of my mind. She planted the seed and it’s taken no time at all to grow, blooming into a new, full-fledged fantasy I intend to make reality. Along with about a dozen others that involve her.

Burying my head between her thighs while she reads a book. Stroking her pussy while she straddles my lap as we sit in my office. Taking her up against one of the shelves in her shop while I hold my hand over her mouth to smother her cries because bookstores and libraries are supposed to be silent spaces.

The list is long and constantly growing.

Jillian bites her lower lip, pinching it between her teeth. “You might regret that offer.”

I slide one hand around her back, easing it down to grip the curve of her ass, pulling her tight to me. “Never.” My phone starts to vibrate in my pocket, signaling the end of my lunch break. “I’ve got to go.”

“What?” Jillian leans back, eyes meeting mine. “You haven’t even eaten yet.”

I like that she doesn’t want me to go, and if I could stay with her I would. “I’ll be fine.” I give her a quick kiss before grabbing my bag, rounding the counter, and heading for the door. “But I’ve got a fifteen-minute break at three if you want to bring me something to snack on.”

Jillian groans, eyes rolling toward the ceiling. “That sounded so corny.”

I pause, halfway out. “Does that mean I shouldn’t expect you?”

She scoffs, crossing her arms over her chest. “That’s not what it means and you know it.”

“Good.” I grin, backing out onto the sidewalk and holding the door wide as a delivery man heads inside carrying the vase of yellow tulips I ordered this morning.

Jillian’s face lights up the second she sees them, her smile as bright and happy as the flowers sitting on her counter.

I enjoy the sight for a second before rushing to my office and setting up a weekly delivery.

Fuck coming on strong.

Fuck jumping in too fast.

Fuck caring too much.

I’m done holding back and I’m done trying to be something I’m not.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

JILLIAN

“BARNABY.” NOAH GIVES the bird a glare from across the kitchen. “Leave her alone.”

“He’s fine.” I hold Barnaby’s fruit cup as he picks through it, perched on my shoulder the same way he has been every evening for the past week. “As long as he doesn’t shit on me, I don’t mind if he wants to sit here.”

Barnaby chews through the grape in his mouth before nuzzling against my cheek. “*Hi there.*”

“Hi there, handsome.” I reach up and stroke down his feathers as Noah whips up our dinner, stir frying together leftover rice with chicken and vegetables.

“He’s trying to trick you into thinking he’s not an asshole.” Noah’s a little grumbly tonight, and I’m pretty sure it has something to do with the fact that I tried to sneak over to his gym today, hoping for a little servicing, only to find him with a client. The look on his face had been hysterical, and made it clear he was just as disappointed as I was. Maybe even more.

“That’s kind of funny considering you started off by trying to trick me into thinking *you* were an asshole.” I give Noah a grin, hoping the teasing will lighten his mood.

“I wasn’t trying to make you think I was an asshole. I was trying to make you think I wasn’t already obsessed with you.” He lifts the spatula in his hand, pointing it my direction. “There’s a very big difference.”

“Obsessed is a strong word.” He’s used it before when trying to explain how he ended up so single for so long. I’m

still not sure he's given me the full answer, but I think I'm starting to figure it out.

Noah likes to excel at everything he does. He's also hard as hell on himself and assumes everyone else in the world will be hard on him too. It's why he's struggled to make friends and refuses to allow himself to feel included, no matter how hard the people around him try.

But, like me, Noah seems to realize he might need to do a little work on himself, which makes me feel less like I suck. If someone as awesome as Noah has room to grow, then I don't feel so bad about my own issues and shortcomings.

Some of which he seems surprisingly partial to.

"You scowled at me every time I saw you." Noah refocuses on our dinner. "How could I not be obsessed?"

I snort out a laugh. "You're probably the only man in the world that gets a boner over a woman scowling at him."

His lips slowly lift at the edges. "I guess it's a good thing our paths crossed then."

Barnaby nudges me again, rubbing his head against my cheek like a cat. "*Hi there.*"

"Stop flirting with her when I'm trying to flirt with her." Noah shoots him another look. "I saw her first."

The past week has been interesting. Bizarre, even. Staying at Noah's house should feel uncomfortable, but it's been surprisingly easy to settle in.

Easy enough that I'm struggling with the fact that at some point I'll have to go back to my apartment. I can only drag my feet for so long before it gets weird, and I'm pretty sure that time is closing in on me.

"Have you talked to Elana tonight?" Noah glances up at me, his tone calm and cautious.

We talk about Elana every night. He always double-checks to make sure she hasn't had any issues. She only stayed here one night, insisting that once Blake installed cameras there was no reason for her not to go home. She did give me access

to the feed, though, which made Noah feel better since we'll be able to check in on her at any time.

But I know he's still uneasy. So am I.

"We texted back and forth a bit. Talked a little about the bookshop and what her attorney said." After Austin showed up at her apartment last week, I convinced Elana to see what her options were to officially document the situation and if she had any recourse.

Unfortunately, until he does something terrible, she can't do anything. And that makes zero fucking sense to me. He's already hurt her once—and spent the night in jail for it—how big of a stretch is it to believe he's capable of doing it again? How much fucking smoke does there have to be before someone finally admits the damn building is on fire?

"Is she still doing okay?" Noah dumps the rice out into two large bowls. "She and Bella are always welcome to stay here anytime."

I press my lips together, wanting to let the opportunity he's presented pass. But I can't.

"You're going to get sick of having people stay with you soon." I focus on Barnaby, petting down the softness of his feathers. "You're probably ready to have peace and quiet again as it is."

I'm in a situation I've never been in before. One I've never given much thought because I didn't intend to experience it. But somehow fate tricked me into what might be a relationship, and now I have no clue what to do about it.

Outside of sneaking next door to Noah's office when I have a little bit of free time.

Noah picks up the bowls and comes my way. "You've met my bird. What in the hell makes you think I've ever enjoyed peace and quiet?" He sets the bowls down on the table and comes back to lure Barnaby back into his cage with new snacks.

I take my spot and sit down, poking through the rice as I think over his non-answer. I can't be upset at it. I didn't

actually ask him a question.

But how do I ask if I should be putting more effort into buying a new bed so I can get back to my own apartment? How do I feel him out to see if he's more than ready to get his life and his privacy back?

I'm starting to realize I'm actually not much more experienced than Noah is. Sure I've had more sex than he has, but none of it was anything like the sex I've had with him. I'm completely clueless when it comes to relationships. And it's starting to show.

Once Barnaby is back in his home, Noah slides into the chair next to me, shoving in a big bite of food as he points at mine. "Eat up. We've got things to do."

Normally I would be super excited about that since I'm pretty sure I know what *things* we have to do. But I'm caught up in an emotion I've worked hard to avoid, thinking it would be the worst mistake I could ever make.

I like a boy and I don't know how to tell if he likes me as much as I like him.

Noah's eyes settle on my face. "You're thinking really hard about something."

I continue shifting the food in my bowl around, deciding between which of the concerns currently taking up space in my brain I want to offer him. I end up settling on the one that seems the safest to discuss. "I'm still a little worried about the whole lease thing." I sigh. "And about Mauricio."

It's sad that talking about the possible loss of my shop and the fact that our landlord is still essentially missing is easier for me to handle than discussing what's going on between me and Noah. It is though.

Maybe it's because each day that passes without Mauricio showing up to tell me he's really evicting me makes it seem less likely that it's going to happen. I don't want to be relieved about that, especially considering I'm still positive those were gunshots we heard in his office, but I am. Moving Spicy

Stacks was near impossible to consider before. Now that Noah and I are... whatever we are, the thought of it is even worse.

I like being next door to him. Like knowing I can sneak over and see his smiling face whenever I want. I tend to let myself get bogged down and frustrated, and being around someone so positive and happy reminds me that I need to keep my reactions to the world in check. I don't want to end up bitter and jaded, and I sure as heck don't want to pass my own unhappiness off to anyone else.

In short, don't want to end up like my mother.

"I'm a little worried about him too." Noah leans back in his chair, crossing both arms over his chest. "I know he's never been the most reliable, but I just can't believe we wouldn't have heard something by now." He hesitates. "Especially considering the letter he sent you."

"Right?" I lean forward, bracing my arms across the table. "Who sends a letter like that and then disappears off the face of the earth?" I chew on my lower lip, contemplating the possibilities. "He would have to be the most passive aggressive person in the world to do something like that."

I've leased from Mauricio for almost five years, and in that time I've found him to be many things, few of them positive, but he's never come across as passive aggressive. More just unreliable and absentee.

"I guess we could go talk to the rest of the tenants. See if anyone else has heard from him." Noah goes back to his food, but only pushes it around. "I didn't really want to get other people involved in this after what happened at your apartment, but I'm not seeing any other option."

I get what he's saying and understand completely. After Detective Wentz didn't believe what we told him, I've been a little hesitant to pass the story along to anyone else. Especially since our report of the incident resulted in the trashing of my apartment.

"I should probably be the one to do it." I glance around Noah's home. "At this point I'd rather they go after my

apartment than your house.”

Noah is shaking his head before I finish talking. “No. Absolutely not.” His jaw clenches the way it does when he’s set on his decision. “You’re not putting yourself at the center of whatever this is.”

“Maybe it really is nothing.” I don’t like admitting I’m wrong, especially when I know I’m not, but I don’t know what else to do. “Maybe Detective Wentz is right. Maybe we really didn’t hear gunshots. Maybe it was a car backfiring or maybe Mauricio’s office is haunted.”

One of Noah’s dark brows lifts. “Now we’re going with a haunting?”

I huff out a breath, flopping back in the seat. “I don’t know. All I know is that if Mauricio really wants to kick me out, he’s going to have to show his ass up to do it.”

I hate being like this, but our landlord’s really not leaving me any choice. I get the letter of nonrenewal is probably some sort of legal document, but I want an explanation. I also want the opportunity to plead my case. I’m willing to pay more in rent. I’m willing to clean my own freaking windows. Hell, I’ll even pay for my own repairs. I just can’t afford the upfront cost of a move. Especially now that I have to replace half the shit in my apartment.

“At the very least someone should be in the office.” Noah works his jaw from side to side. “I’ve gone back every day and the door’s been locked every time.”

I’m not surprised to find out that Noah’s continued trying to get in touch with Mauricio any way he can, but I’m a little upset he’s gone back to the scene of what I’m still pretty positive was a crime. “Are you sure you should be going back there when we still don’t know what happened?”

Noah checks the time on his cell phone. “I’m sure we need to figure out where in the hell Mauricio is, and since I don’t know where he lives the best option I have is blowing up his phone and stalking his office.”

I press my fingers into my temples, trying to ease the tension building in my brain. “Maybe we should just drop it. He’ll have to show up to evict me, right?”

Noah frowns at me. “This isn’t just about the lease, Jillian.” I think he’s going to chastise me for not really caring that Mauricio might be dead, but instead Noah reaches across the table to take my hand with his. “I don’t feel comfortable letting you go home until we know who was behind what happened at his office. They came to your apartment once and I won’t put it past them to come there again.”

I understand his concern, but honestly it’s not really felt like that pressing of an issue compared to some of the others happening around me. “But they haven’t been back. Maybe they realized I don’t actually know anything.”

“Or maybe they know we set cameras up and don’t want to risk getting caught.” Noah stands up, carrying his uneaten dinner into the kitchen.

“How would they know we set up cameras?” My appetite suddenly gone, I get up and follow him. “They would have to get inside to see them.”

“Not if they were watching your apartment and saw Blake pull up in his work truck.” Noah dumps his rice into a storage container. “It would be pretty simple for them to do the math on that and figure out what was going on.”

I slide my bowl onto the counter. “I can’t just stay here forever.” I pause, feeling a little nervous as I take a second swing at the topic I tried to bring up earlier. “You probably want to get back to your normal life.”

Noah’s dark eyes lift from where they’re focused on the food he’s packing up. They hold mine a second before he drops what he’s holding and comes my way, his big body crowding me back against the counter before bracketing me in place with his hands against the edge. His head tips down so his eyes are in line with mine. “It sounds like I might not have been clear enough about your place in my life, Jillian.” He eases closer, bringing the front of his body to the front of mine. “You can be in my home and in my bed anytime you

want. If you never want to go back to your apartment I will have a moving truck there first thing in the morning to pack it up and bring everything you own here.”

I suck in a breath as his nose brushes up the side of mine. I like everything he’s saying, but I’m struggling to believe he really means it. Not because of the way my mother raised me, but because of the way I carried all she said with me, allowing it to keep me from ever being vulnerable with another person.

And right now I feel very vulnerable. Vulnerable enough that I can’t hide it even though I know I sound needy and difficult. “I don’t want you to feel like you just got stuck with me and that I screwed your whole life up.”

I expect Noah to be frustrated. I would be. But he slowly smiles, looking unbothered by my fears. “I’ve been trying to get stuck with you for months.” He straightens away from me, snagging my hand with his. “The only part of my life that’s changed is now I have someone at my side.” He pulls me toward the garage door. “And right now *we* have somewhere to be.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JILLIAN STARES AT the building in front of us before giving me a wary glance. “What are we doing here?”

I climb out of the Jeep and grab my bag from the back. “We’re teaching a class.”

I’ve had to cancel the last few sessions at Shady Glen because of everything going on, but it’s time to get back into my normal routine and it’s time to make Jillian a part of it. I want her to stay with me, even once all this is over, but I’m not quite sure how to accomplish that outside of showing her how easy it would be to stay.

I lead her into the building, tipping my head in greeting at the man posted at the front desk. Normally I stop and chat with him, but tonight I want to make sure Jillian has time to wrap her head around what we’re doing.

The chairs are set up in the community room when we walk in and a few of the aides that take the class are already there, stretching out.

Jillian lifts a brow at me as I set my bag down. “This is where you’re teaching a class?”

“Yup.” I pull out one of the resistance bands and hold it out to her. “Sit anywhere you want.”

So far I haven’t told Jillian that I’m itching to show her how beneficial physical movement can be. She’s had a lot on her plate and I didn’t want it to seem like I need her to be involved in all the parts of my life.

But I do.

I want a partner. A best friend. Someone who wants to spend their time with me the same way I want to spend my time with them. So far Jillian is checking off all my boxes but I want her to see everything I am and all that I want.

All I need.

Jillian gives me a little smirk as she takes the band. “I’m guessing your face isn’t an option.”

The sexy tease catching me off guard and I grab her by the front of the sundress, dragging her close. “It can be if you work really hard in class.”

Jillian’s brows lift. “I think you just unlocked a teacher/student kink I didn’t know I had.”

“Let’s put a pin in that.” I press a quick kiss to her lips as a few residents start to filter in. “Grab a chair for now and later we can revisit.”

She pinches her lower lip between her teeth, giving me the same look she does when she saunters into the gym, hoping to catch me during a break. “Promise?”

“Swear.” She’ll be lucky if we make it out of the parking lot before I circle back because now I’ve got a fantasy of my own brewing in my brain. One that makes it insanely difficult to stand in front of a room full of retirees without pitching a tent in my shorts.

By the end of the class I’m practically crawling out of my skin and ready to get my hands all over her. I shove all the bands into my bag, rushing to get everything collected as fast as possible so I can drag Jillian out of this place and into my Jeep.

I turn to find her, only to discover that she’s made a new friend. One that doesn’t bode well for my hopes of a speedy exit.

Ruth and Jillian sit side-by-side, holding hands. They’re both laughing. Jillian swipes at the corner of one eye as she continues to cackle at what Ruth’s saying.

I don't have to hear to know which story my grandmother's friend is telling. There's only one that would have Jillian cracking up the way she is.

I move over to where Ruth is filling Jillian in on one of the first classes I taught at Shady Glen. "You couldn't even wait ten minutes to tell her that story?"

Ruth is still laughing when she looks up at me. "Oh, come on. I've been waiting forever to tell someone that story." She turns back to Jillian, patting her hand. "And this lovely young lady asked me how long you've been teaching here, so naturally I had to tell her about the day you thought you killed half the class."

"Naturally." I can't be mad. The story is pretty funny now that I've had some time to recover from the shock of having five separate residents collapse mid-workout. "I'm just glad no one broke a hip falling out of their chair while they were pretending to die."

I found out that people get ornery when they have a lot of time on their hands the same day I found out the residents of Shady Glen indoctrinate new visitors by faking mass death.

It's actually a miracle I didn't have an actual heart attack that day.

"So, how do you two know each other?" Ruth redirects the conversation even though she knows full well how Jillian and I met.

"We work next door to each other." Jillian's eyes lift to mine. "And it turns out he's kind of into girls that like books."

Ruth looks Jillian over, motioning to her summer dress and the cardigan she layers over it in the air-conditioning. "You do have a librarian-ish look to you."

Jillian beams at her like that's the best compliment she's ever gotten. "I was going to be a librarian until I found out how much school would cost."

"Pshhh." Ruth waves one hand, her lip curling. "What they're charging for education is criminal." She leans closer to Jillian. "Do you know how much my great-granddaughter is

paying to become a teacher?” She doesn’t wait for a guess. “Almost a hundred thousand dollars. To make under fifty thousand a year.” She shakes her head. “Ridiculous.”

I snag Ruth’s exercise band while she’s distracted, stuffing it in my bag before taking Jillian’s. “Luckily she’ll be doing something that fulfills her.” I zip everything up and take Jillian’s hand in mine. “And that’s priceless.” I haul her up out of her seat, knowing the conversation is starting to slide down a slippery slope.

Once Ruth starts talking about her great-grandkids and the economy, she can go on forever, and while I love her, I would also very much like to get out of here before midnight.

Jillian resists my grip, reaching out to rest one hand on Ruth’s shoulder the same way she did with Mr. Rigellio. “It was so nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, dear.” Ruth gives me an exaggerated wink that scrunches up half of her wrinkled face.

I drop my head back and stare at the ceiling. “You’re not supposed to do that when she’s looking at you.”

Ruth continues winking, the move looking a little more like a blink. “What? There’s something in my eye.” She abruptly recovers from her eye issue and points at me, jabbing a finger at my face. “You better bring her around again.”

“She’ll be back to see you on Monday.” I continue tugging on Jillian, leading her away from Ruth. “And tell everyone she knows about the pretending to die thing.”

At this point the stunt won’t be a surprise, but the last thing I want is a bunch of octogenarians falling on the floor as a joke and actually getting hurt.

“She is really nice.” Jillian keeps her hand in mine, sticking close at my side as we move through the halls. “She says she knew your grandma.”

“She did. They were best friends.”

Jillian smiles, the expression warm and more at home on her face than I’ve ever seen it. “I’m really glad you still come

here.”

I give her hand a little squeeze. “Me too.” I open the door, taking her out into the parking lot. “I’m glad you came with me tonight.”

“I wasn’t aware I had a choice.” Jillian’s smile turns to a teasing smirk. “You just told me we had somewhere to be.”

I go to where my Jeep is parked at the edge of the lot, keeping Jillian’s hand in mine as I toss my bag into the back then open her door. She climbs in and I close it before jogging around to my side. I fall into my seat and lean across the console. Jillian meets me halfway, the peck she offers making it clear she thinks I’m simply being sweet.

I’m not. Not right now.

I snag the front of her dress with one hand and pull her close when she starts to move away, catching Jillian’s lips in another kiss. One I don’t back off of.

She leans into me, tongue sliding against mine as her arms link around my neck, dragging me in.

I let go of her dress, smoothing across the fabric as I tease around the swell of her tit before palming it so I can work her nipple with my fingers.

Jillian sucks in a breath that ends on a soft whimper. The needy sound emboldens me. Drags my free hand down the front of her dress to slide the hem up her thighs.

I’m still irritated from missing out on the opportunity to please her today and I want her to know how grateful I am that she came here with me tonight.

How much I appreciate her for all that she is.

My fingers slide under the fabric of her dress, moving higher to skim across the lace of her panties.

Jillian pulls her lips from mine and her eyes dart out the windshield, jumping around the darkening parking lot. “We can’t do that here.” Her eyes come back to me. “Can we?”

“We absolutely can.” I tease along the waistband of the only bit of clothing keeping me from what I want. “And we absolutely should.”

Her eyes dip down to where the line of my cock juts against the fabric of my athletic shorts. “What about you?”

Jillian has become kind of a stickler about both of us getting off. To the point that I have to pack extra clothes in my work bag every day just in case she visits my office and I end up ruining the first pair while I lick her to climax.

I grab the front of my shirt, pulling it over my head and dropping it next to me so it's within easy reach. Then I push down the waistband of my shorts, freeing my cock and giving it a stroke as I meet her heated gaze. “Now it will be an easy clean-up.”

Jillian takes another quick glance around the lot before grabbing the back of my neck and pulling my mouth to hers.

I love how eager she is for my touch. How happy she is to let me please her. How insistent she is on making sure I enjoy myself too.

I work my fingers into the front of her panties, groaning when she immediately parts her thighs, giving me room to work. Giving me room to make her feel good.

She's already wet and my skin slides across her hot flesh as I seek out her clit, wanting to feel her come bad enough that I'm unwilling to waste any time. I circle the hard nub, slicking against it with a steady glide that has her hips rocking almost immediately.

The feel of her cunt and the sounds she makes are everything I crave and soon I'm gripping my aching cock with my free hand, pumping it in time to each slide of my fingers against her body.

Jillian pushes back from me, her eyes locking on where I'm fucking my fist. All the air rushes from her lungs as she watches me. “Holy shit that's hot.”

I've never focused much on my own pleasure. It ruined things for me too many times. To the point I almost started to

resent it.

But seeing the way it affects Jillian has me looking at it a little differently. If my enjoyment feeds hers the same way hers feeds mine then holding it back is punishing us both, a fact that's taken away a little of the pressure that used to overwhelm me.

Jillian's pupils dilate as they lock onto where my hand strokes against my shaft, working my cock as I tease her clit. "Faster."

I pick up my speed, flattening my fingers between the soft, swollen skin of her labia, rubbing back and forth with a careful touch as I pump my dick.

"Don't stop." She grips the arm rest, hips lifting off the seat. "Don't stop."

"Never." I grit the word out between clenched teeth as my balls pull tight and my dick swells. Jillian's thighs clamp around my palm, pinning it in place as she grinds against it, her climax fueling my own, sending hot spurts of cum across my belly as my vision blacks and my ears ring.

My senses are so consumed by the moment and by her that I almost miss the strange sound at the back of the Jeep.

But the nearness and familiarity of the noise snaps me back to reality and has me grabbing Jillian and dragging her down as the rear window splits and shatters. I cover her body with mine as an engine revs and tires squeal. I lift my head just in time to see a pair of taillights and a flash of red paint as a car races away.

Jillian grabs at me, nails digging into my skin as she tries to pull me back down. "What are you doing? You're going to get shot."

I grab my shirt, pulling it on over the mess across my stomach as I shove my dick into my pants. "They already left."

Jillian peeks around the side of her seat, wide eyes searching the open spot where my back window used to be. "Are you sure?"

“Positive.” I grab my bag and dig out my cell. “I saw them pull away.”

Jillian’s eyes snap to mine. “You did?”

“I did.” I snag Detective Wentz’s card from my console and punch in his number as I look over the mess in the backseat of my Jeep. “And I’m pretty sure no one’s going to be able to claim we didn’t really hear the gunshot this time.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“I’M NOT A fan of this Detective Wentz guy.” Elana sits on the floor behind the register at Spicy Stacks, unpacking our newest delivery and stacking the items into place under the counter. “He sounds like kind of a tool.”

“He sounds like he thinks I’m fucking stupid.” I’m still pissed off about what happened last night at Shady Glen. Not just the part where Noah’s back window got busted out, but the part where Detective Wentz decided we still didn’t know what gunfire sounded like.

“I just don’t get how he can keep saying nothing’s going on.” Elana pauses, brows pinching together before holding up a box. “Is this new? I’ve never seen one of these before.”

I snatch the item away. “That doesn’t go on the shelf.”

Elana glances over the package in my hands before going back to her task. “I wouldn’t think you’d need something like that anymore.”

I stuff the high-end vibrator down in my purse before tucking the bag back into place. “I’m just replacing everything I had at home because God only knows what they did with it when they broke in.” I ended up throwing my entire self-pleasure stash in the trash. There was no way possible to scrub them enough to clean off whatever might have touched them.

Noah might be helping with the selection and testing process of the devices, but Elana doesn’t need to know that.

She makes a little face as she stacks the next product into place. “Yeah, I can’t blame you there. I would have thrown

them all away too.” Her eyes jump to me as she sits up a little straighter. “You could probably claim them on your renter’s insurance. Recoup some of the cost.”

I snort out a little laugh at the possibility. “I’m sure my insurance agent would love filing a claim for vibrators.”

It’s almost worth considering just to see the look on his face.

“These things are expensive and that’s what you have insurance for.” Elana looks over the stacks in front of her. “I bet you had five hundred dollars’ worth and that’s more than enough to warrant mentioning.”

“Maybe.” I should probably consider it since there’s still a chance I might be evicted from the strip mall soon and if that happens I’ll need every penny I can get. “You think he would need descriptions or could I just lump them together under ‘household items’?”

Elana purses her lips, considering it a second. “Wouldn’t they be tools?”

A laugh jumps out of me, the sound startling enough that I slap one hand over my mouth. I’m still getting used to the lighter way I’ve been feeling and sometimes I forget and it surprises me. My immediate reaction is still to stifle it. To cut off any hint of warmth so people know not to fuck with me. That I know how they are and won’t tolerate their bullshit.

Honestly, I liked having that barrier between me and the world. Smugly thought I was being smarter than everyone else.

Turns out I was just being a bitch.

“I’m totally going to tell him I need to replace all my tools.” I pull out a pad of paper and start jotting down items. I called my insurance guy right after the break-in, but I never got back to him with a full list of what I lost. “He’ll think I’m a regular Bob the Builder.”

“I’d pay money to find a Bob the Builder that knew his way around a vibrator.” Elana sighs. “I know I’m definitely done with the suit-wearing asshats.”

I want to pass along my newfound enlightenment, but now's not the right time to point out that making blanket judgments and placing blame on an entire group of people because of one bad behavior might not be fair. Elana's been through enough that she deserves to be a little unfair.

And maybe my mother did too. I can't blame her for being upset that my dad left her. Left us.

But I can blame her for putting that burden on me. For continuing to feed the fire she lit, hoping I would carry the same torch she did.

I glance to the door as a delivery man walks in, a large vase of lilies in his hands.

I try to smother out my smile as Elana stands beside me. Not because I'm scared to be happy, which I still am a little, but because I know she *isn't* happy and I don't like feeling as if I'm rubbing her face in my own bliss.

But I know the flowers are from Noah and it's impossible for me to think of him without smiling. Even though it's terrifying. Even though I know there's a chance it might not last. Even though I know getting close to him, or anyone for that matter, is a risk. After a lifetime of playing it safe, that's a risk I'm willing to take.

"More flowers?" Elana shakes her head, but the smile on her face is almost as big as the one on mine. "I guess I should consider moving on to personal trainers." She pulls the envelope free of the arrangement and passes it my way. "That seems to be working out pretty darn well for you."

I slide the card from the envelope, rolling my eyes at the words printed across the small square of cardstock.

*Nor did I wonder at the lily's white,
Nor praise the deep vermilion in the rose;
They were but sweet, but figures of delight
Drawn after you.*

It's a little corny, but the line of Shakespeare's Sonnet 98 is so very Noah that I can't help but love it.

Just like I'm starting to accidentally love most things about him. I'm not sure if this is how actual love starts, but I'm guessing it probably is.

And the prospect makes me feel equal parts terror and excitement.

Elana carefully removes the cardboard protecting the vase, sliding it in with the rest of the collapsed boxes from today's delivery. "If Noah's going to send you flowers every week you should probably tell him they offer services that will rotate out the vases."

"Good call. My apartment definitely doesn't have the storage space for weekly vase deliveries." I move the flowers to the same spot I put the tulips he sent last week. "It barely has room for all my dishes."

Elana snorts next to me. "Are you really pretending like you're going to move back to your apartment?"

"He's gotta want me to go home at some point, right?" I stare at the flowers, wishing just a little that the card said something more definitive about his expectations for our relationship. "He can't just want me to stay there forever."

"Why not?" Elana goes back to work unpacking the delivery. "I don't think there's actually a schedule of the way things should work for a relationship to be successful." She tags each item before sliding it on the shelf. "I mean, I did everything exactly the way people think it should go and look where I ended up."

The mention of Austin ruins my mood almost immediately. "I don't understand why he can't just go away." I grab the next shipping box as soon as she empties it and rip at the flaps, tearing the tape loose the way I wish I could tear Austin apart. "You don't want to be with him anymore. He should get over it and move on."

"That's not really how narcissists work." Elana puts the final vibrator in place and leans back against the wall, slumping down a little. "They don't like to be told no. It hurts their fragile ego too much and they can't take it."

I continue ripping at the box. “I’d like to hurt his fragile ego.” The thing finally gives and I flatten it out. “Among other things.”

Elana presses against her temples, rubbing in a circular motion. “I just don’t want this to mess Bella up. I don’t want her to end up thinking men are awful and terrible just because of him.”

All the anger rushes right out of me because I know why she thinks that.

It’s because of me.

I drop the box onto the pile and slide down to the floor next to my friend, resting my head on her shoulder. “She won’t because she has a good mom who will teach her not to be angry.” I wrap my arm around her and pull her into a side hug. “She will be okay. I promise.”

Elana’s fears might be my fault, but that’s also the reason I feel like I have at least a little bit of authority to speak on the subject. Probably better than most people.

I know Bella will be okay because I know I will be okay. I also know she will be okay much sooner than me because she’ll be surrounded by people helping her understand that there are bad eggs everywhere and they’re not just men or women. She will be taught there are also good people everywhere, and they make it worth the risk of putting yourself out there.

Elana grips my arm, sniffing a little as she leans into my hug. “You’re the best. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“Well you probably would’ve sold way fewer vibrators, that’s for sure.”

She snorts out a laugh, swiping at her eyes as the bell on the door rings. “We need to get up or they’re going to think this place is abandoned.”

“We also need to get up because it’s almost lunchtime and I’m starving.” I push up from the floor and reach one hand down to help Elana up.

She grabs it with a little smile. “Don’t try to convince me you’re excited for lunch.” She gives me a wink. “You’re just excited that you get to see No-ah.” She says his voice in a singsongy way that almost feels like we’re teenagers. Yet another thing I can’t help but love.

I guess I’m just fucking full of sunshine and rainbows now. A goddamn unicorn in my own right.

“Of course I’m excited to see him. Have you looked at his ass?” My phone starts to ring and I reach under the counter to grab it.

“If I say yes are you going to get mad at me?”

I give Elana a grin. “Never.” I glance down at the screen of my cell, expecting it to be Noah letting me know he’s ordered our lunch and will be over shortly, but the name displayed across the screen makes my happy heart skitter to a stop. “Oh shit.” I look at Elana as my stomach hits my shoes. “It’s Mauricio.”

Elana’s brows slowly climb up her forehead. “I guess he’s not dead.”

That’s still to be seen.

I connect the call, pressing it to my ear as I hold my breath. “Hello?”

“Hello, Jillian. It’s your landlord. Mauricio.”

I widen my eyes at Elana and mouth the words *it’s him* before responding. “I’m so happy to hear from you, Mauricio. We’ve been really worried about you.”

“I heard there were some issues. I’ve been out of the country and just arrived back in town. I was hoping you could come to my office so we could discuss the letter you received about your lease.”

Oh God. I think I’m going to throw up, but I plaster on a smile so Elana won’t worry. “Sure. When?”

Elana steps closer to me, eyes fixed on my face as she reaches out to grab my hand with hers, squeezing it tight in a way that makes it clear she’s not fooled by my fake smile.

“If you are available now that would be preferable.” Mauricio doesn’t give me a second option, so I’m going to assume now is the time.

“Yeah. That’s fine. I’ll make sure everything here is okay and then I’ll come straight back.”

“Excellent. I will see you soon.” Mauricio immediately ends the call, the line going dead in my ear.

I set my phone down, taking a calming breath. I really wish I could afford to move because I don’t want to be his tenant anymore. Especially now that I know he’s been alive this whole time and still let us continue to worry about his well-being. I get being on vacation, but damn. I think I’d take five minutes away from the beach for a welfare check if I’d been in his position.

I take another shaky breath as I swipe at the baby hairs falling loose of my messy bun. “I guess I’m going to go talk to Mauricio about the lease.” I try to swallow but my throat doesn’t seem to want to cooperate and I nearly choke on panic and my own spit.

I need to get it together.

I smooth down the front of my T-shirt, making sure it’s tucked into my jean shorts as I stiffly walk around the counter. “I’ll be right back.” Stepping out into the warm air, I almost turn left, but walking past Noah’s gym is not a good idea right now. If I see his face I’ll start to cry, and I don’t want to go into Mauricio’s office puffy and tear-streaked. So instead I turn right, passing the two vacant spaces on the other side of my shop before walking up the side of the building.

Both paths are the same basic distance, but this one provides me a little more privacy than the one that would’ve taken me up the front of the strip mall. It affords me the opportunity to verbally pump myself up for the meeting I’m about to have.

“You can do this. It’s going to be fine. If he wants to cancel your lease then you will just offer to pay more rent.” I take another breath, this one moving a little easier. “What

landlord in his right mind would turn down higher rent?" I shake my head as I answer my own question. "None of them."

It's true. I know it is. The problem is I'm not quite sure that Mauricio is in his right mind. A person in their right mind would have also called to let their tenants know he hadn't actually been shot, dragged, and dumped into a hole somewhere. A landlord in his right mind wouldn't have sent a nonrenewal of a lease and then disappeared off the face of the earth.

By the time I round the back corner of the building and start up the alleyway Noah and I took the night we thought we might have heard Mauricio's murder, I'm pissed.

Pissed that he let us think he was dead. Pissed that he thinks he can just kick me out. Pissed that he can't be bothered to keep up the building or return a fucking phone call.

I'm so mad that I'm stomping across the blacktop, oblivious to anything happening around me until something creeps into my peripheral vision.

I stop, jumping out of the way as a red sedan slowly coasts past me, coming close enough that they might have bumped me if I hadn't moved when I did.

I throw my arms out, anger overflowing. "*Watch it.*"

The car suddenly stops and I can't help but think it's not so they can apologize.

That's fine. I'm ready for a fight and ready to tear into whoever crosses my path.

Lucky for me the guy that gets out of the car is more than deserving of my wrath.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“YOU SEEM DISTRACTED.” Albert, my eleven o’clock client, eyes me as we pause between sets. “Everything okay?”

I give him a quick smile. “Everything’s fine.”

Everything is more than fine. My business is doing well. I live in a place where I get to enjoy warm weather every day. And I finally found someone I’m comfortable around. Comfortable enough to be myself without worrying about everything I say and do.

And that’s fucking priceless.

But that doesn’t mean I can slack off at work, so I need to get my head back in the game.

I drag my eyes from the front windows and refocus on what I’m supposed to be doing, putting all my energy into giving Albert the best half-hour I can.

By the time we’re finished he’s breathing heavy and his arms are hanging limp at his sides, worn out from the effort of rebuilding the strength he lost after suffering a stroke over the summer.

He’s a perfect example of why I do what I do. It changes lives. Mentally and physically helping people recover and cope.

After helping him stretch and cool down I send him on his way. He’s barely out the door before I’m on my way to my office, ready to order lunch and spend my break next-door with Jillian.

I mentally flip through our food options as I go, settling on a soup and salad place all three of us love since I'm pretty sure I saw Elena pull in not long ago. I drop down into my chair and pull up the app on my phone, placing the order as fast as I can before quickly returning a few emails that can't wait.

I'm on my way out of the office just before noon, itching to see Jillian even though it's barely been four hours since we parted ways.

I'm halfway to the door when Jesse stops me, falling in step beside me. "Sylvia and her friends booked for the next six months."

I barely slow down, giving him a little of the attention I've already focused on seeing Jillian. "That's great."

"It is. They seem pretty happy with what we're doing." He continues at my side as we pass the front desk. "I also wanted to invite you and Jillian to join us at Sloopy's tonight after work."

I almost say no. Almost shut Jesse down the way I have so many times before.

But then I stop, turning to the man who is my employee but has also tried to be my friend. "I think that sounds great." I slap him on the shoulder, trying not to worry about whether or not that's the right response, or if I'm being too friendly and familiar. "We will be there."

I'm still not entirely comfortable with the idea, but I feel a little less intimidated knowing Jillian will be at my side. Knowing that no matter what at least one person won't judge me for whatever random shit comes out of my mouth.

Jesse's smile is immediate and wide, like he's genuinely happy that I accepted the invitation. "Awesome." He returns my shoulder smack, making it seem like that was an expected show of manly affection. "We'll leave here around eight."

"We'll be there. I'll go tell Jillian now." I pull open the door and step out onto the sidewalk, ready to get to Jillian's side.

And then my phone starts to ring in my pocket.

“For the love of—” I yank it out, ready to decline the call.

But then I see the name across the screen.

“Holy shit.” I connect the call, half expecting to hear an unfamiliar voice on the other end of the line. “Mauricio?”

“Hello, Noah.” Mauricio’s jovial voice and slight Italian accent carries through the line and my jaw drops. “I received a number of messages from you while I was out of the country on vacation.”

I’m stunned. Stunned and pissed.

“Yeah, you did. Someone was shooting a gun off in your office and I thought something happened to you.” I can’t believe this guy has been fucking alive the whole time, knowing Jillian and I were worried about his safety, and he just went about his merry fucking holiday. “I was trying to make sure you were okay and it would have been nice to get a call back. I get you were out of the country but you could have at least told your building manager to let me know you were safe.”

I’m not normally this guy. The one who calls people out on their bullshit. It’s one of many reasons why I was so stressed out working in corporate America.

But it seems like Jillian’s rubbing off on me the same way I’ve rubbed off on her. And I’m not even mad about it.

“I was hoping you could come to my office so we could have a conversation.” Mauricio just passes right over the whole ‘we thought he was dead thing’ without apologizing or even acknowledging that it’s an issue he should have addressed. “Are you available now?”

I sure fucking am. “I’m on my way.”

I hang up on him before he can respond and go to Jillian’s store, yanking the door open and stalking inside. I know she’ll want to come with me and will be just as eager to give our landlord a piece of her mind.

I scan the store, looking for her in all her normal spots, but the place appears empty.

Suddenly, Elana pops up from behind the counter, her eyes widening when she sees me. “Hey.” She points to the door. “Jillian just left.” Her expression gets serious. “Did you hear that Mauricio is alive?”

“I did.” I already have one hand on the door, ready to go. “Is she on her way back to make sure he’s really murdered this time?”

Elana smirks. “Seemed that way.”

I give her a quick grin, making sure Jillian’s friend doesn’t feel any of the irritation I’m carrying. “Then I’ll make sure it looks like an accident.”

“I appreciate that.” Elana settles onto the stool they keep behind the register. “She’s the only friend I have.”

I pause, giving her my full attention. “That’s not true.”

Elana softly smiles. “That’s really good to hear.”

Maybe if tonight goes well with Jesse and the rest of the trainers that work for me, I can plan some sort of family-friendly evening where Elana can discover there’s more people in her corner than she realizes. Because even though I don’t quite know them socially, there’s not a doubt in my mind that the men and women that work for me would be there for her if she ever needed them. That’s just who they are and it makes me feel a little guilty that I’ve kept them at arm’s length for so long, expecting them to judge me the same way I’ve judged myself.

I lean back, glancing along the front of the building for any sign of Jillian, but she’s nowhere to be seen. “How long has it been since she left?”

“Not even five minutes.” Elana’s smile widens. “Which is probably plenty of time for her to already be rolling Mauricio up in a rug, so you better hurry.”

I laugh even though what she’s saying is bordering on true. I don’t actually think Jillian would kill Mauricio, but she might make him wish he was dead.

I let the door close and jog back past the gym, working my way up the front of the building. I round the corner, expecting to see Jillian, but the side of the strip mall is empty. I continue following the sidewalk, reaching the glass doors of Mauricio's office and stepping inside, surprised that there's still no Jillian.

Mauricio steps out of his office, looking just as healthy and whole as ever. He walks toward me, smiling wide.

Which is surprising.

"Where's Jillian?" She can't be here otherwise I'm positive Mauricio wouldn't be smiling.

"She hasn't arrived yet." He motions toward his office. "Come back. She will be here soon."

I turn away from him, going back to the door. "She should be here now." I'm not talking to Mauricio without her. Jillian deserves first blood and I won't deprive her of that.

I go back outside, but this time I move to the back of the building, heading toward the dumpster we parked beside the night of the gunshots. The gunshots that obviously didn't find their way into Mauricio.

An odd sound, almost like a muffled scream, sends a chill down my spine. I can't quite tell where it came from, but I know it wasn't behind me. I start to run in the direction I'm already headed, darting around the dumpster. I immediately see an altercation in the alley. It's hard to tell what's happening, but it seems like there's at least two people struggling beside the open door of a red sedan.

A red sedan that looks an awful lot like the one I caught a glimpse of last night after someone shot out the window of my Jeep in the lot at Shady Glen.

I start to run faster, pumping my arms until my body is maxed out. Or at least I think it is.

That's when a familiar voice cuts through the air.

"*Motherfucker. I'll kill you.*" Jillian's words are filled with rage and are followed by a sharp, masculine grunt as the man she's wrestling doubles over.

I push myself harder, muscles burning as I race down the back of the strip mall, flying over the choppy blacktop as fast as my feet will take me. I don't slow down as I reach the car, jumping around the open door and grabbing onto the man who now has his hands around Jillian's throat. I haul him along with me, using momentum and the element of surprise to my advantage.

I hold his shirt tight, swinging his flailing body as I plant my feet and pivot, letting go and sending him straight into the side of the building. He hits the block wall hard, looking stunned at the sudden turning of the tables.

I'm back on him in the blink of an eye, one hand gripped tight in the front of his shirt as I pull the other back and let it fly, planting my fist in the center of his face.

I don't need a formal introduction to know who this is, what he's done, or what more he's intending to do.

"You like to put your hands on women?" I pull back and punch him again, the second hit sending a spray of blood out one nostril. "Fucking coward." I hit him again, suddenly understanding why the main characters in so many of the books I've read off my grandmother's shelves spend their whole lives chasing vengeance.

Because it feels fucking amazing.

I hit him a third time, but my fist has barely connected when a gunshot sends me ducking, dropping Austin as I race to grab Jillian.

I snag her from where she's leaning against the car, one hand resting on her throat as she struggles to catch her breath. I grab her, pulling her against me, shielding her body with mine as I move us toward the closest dumpster to take cover.

Jillian slaps my arm, hitting harder until I finally look at her face. She points back the way I came and I turn to find Mauricio standing at the front of the red car, arms outstretched, a pistol gripped in one palm.

He gives me an apologetic smile. "That was my fault. I didn't mean to shoot."

I pull Jillian closer, just because I'm still not sure exactly why the fuck Mauricio has a gun and what exactly he was shooting at. "What the hell are you doing?"

Mauricio gestures with his free hand to where Austin is struggling to get up. "I came to help you. I saw this man assaulting Jillian on the cameras."

Austin groans, gripping his nose as he pushes to his feet.

Mauricio immediately points his pistol Austin's way. "Stay where you are. I will shoot you."

Jillian snorts out a sound that's almost a laugh. "Probably by accident." Her voice is raspy and rough, the scratchy sound of it making me consider getting her to safety so I can go back and finish what I started with Austin.

Because he absolutely deserves whatever I dish out.

"The police are on their way and I've already shot out one of your tires." Mauricio swings his gun wildly, aiming in the general direction of the front of the sedan before pulling the trigger again. "Now two." His eyes snap my way, looking a little too gleeful at the situation we're facing. He motions to Jillian. "You take care of her. I have this."

Jillian moves closer to me. "What is even happening right now?"

"Fucking chaos." I pull her against me and duck behind the dumpster, crouching down as Mauricio swings the gun again, pointing it in the general direction of Austin. I can't help but hope it accidentally goes off.

I slide down the dented metal side of the dumpster until my ass hits the ground, pulling Jillian into my lap and tucking her body against mine as I smooth over her face, doing my best not to focus on the deep red marks streaking across her neck. "Are you okay?"

She gives me a weak smile and a single nod. "In a very general sense, yes."

"I can handle a general yes." I breathe against her hair, trying to calm my racing heart as the sound of sirens fills the

air around us.

Jillian clings to my neck, sniffing a little. “It was Austin that was here the night we heard those shots in Mauricio’s office.” She leans back just a little, peeking over my shoulder in the general direction of where Mauricio stands. “He was also the one that shot out the back window of your Jeep. He’s been following me.” She takes a shaky breath. “Apparently it’s all my fault Elana left him.”

I slide one hand up and down her back as the first police car comes racing up the backside of the building. “It’s not your fault.” I’m a little surprised at how reasonable I sound right now considering I’m still hoping this ends with an accidental discharge that hits Austin right in the middle of his forehead. “He’s got no one to blame but himself.”

Jillian gives me another weak smile. “You might have to keep reminding me of that because right now it feels like everything bad that’s happened to Elana and Bella is my fault.”

Her admission offers a little of the vulnerability Jillian holds so close, and the fact that she trusts me enough to share that brings a little bit of joy to this totally fucked-up situation.

But only a little.

I smooth back her hair, sliding my hands against her face as another cop car skids to a stop. “None of this is your fault, Jillian, so don’t try to make it yours.” The suffocating pressure that started crushing my chest when I heard her first muffled cry eases. “But you can absolutely claim sending that motherfucker to jail.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

One month later

“I CAN’T BELIEVE that asshole Mauricio didn’t renew your lease.” Elana carefully stacks books into the box in front of her, wearing a frown that looks a little too familiar to me.

“I’m actually fine with it.” It’s still a little strange to be the one with the positive outlook in a situation, but I’m starting to see how it can work in a person’s favor. “Especially since Noah somehow charmed him into returning my deposit and letting me stay an extra month rent free.”

I was there when it happened and I’m still not quite sure how he did it. Noah’s just got this friendly, unassuming way about him that totally disarms whoever he’s talking to and makes them forget their initial plans.

I know I did.

“Mauricio’s probably making a sweet deal on the sale of this place and he’s willing to do whatever it takes to clear it out.” Elana snorts, the sound a little bitter.

“It’s probably better that he sells it. He’s not a great landlord.” I take the filled box as she passes it off, taping across the top before jotting down a list of its contents across the side and adding it to the pile growing by the door.

“He’s definitely way better at shooting out tires than he is at managing property.” Elana moves on to the next box, stretching her neck from side to side before crouching down to grab the line of books from the bottom shelf. “Which is a shame. Maybe if he was as skilled at marksmanship as he is

being a landlord he would have hit a whole man instead of a tire.”

“I don’t know that I would call Austin a man.” It’s been a month since Elana’s ex-husband grabbed me in the parking lot, eyes wild in a way that still makes it hard for me to sleep sometimes. “Just call him incarcerated.”

Thankfully Mauricio’s cameras caught the whole incident so there’s no chance he’ll weasel his way out of the attempted kidnapping and assault charges he’s facing.

Hopefully it’s also enough to sever any rights he has to Bella and she and Elana can finally live in peace.

“It almost doesn’t seem like it could be real.” Elana’s expression reveals the tiniest flash of fear. “I still can’t stop looking out the windows at night and expecting to see him there, staring up at me.”

Her fear is something I understand completely. Walking to my car makes me a nervous wreck now if I have to do it without Noah at my side. I keep the metal self-defense keychain Noah bought me gripped tight in my hand, scanning my surroundings to make sure no one’s right behind me, waiting to pounce.

I’m not sure how long this amped up feeling of paranoia is going to last, but I’m a little worried I don’t want to know the answer. The thought of Austin affecting me for the rest of my life chaps my ass almost as much as the thought of Austin affecting Elana and Bella for the rest of theirs.

It’s one of many reasons I realized I needed to go to therapy. As much as I want to work through my complicated feelings about my mom and my dad, I don’t think it’s something I’m capable of doing on my own, no matter how great my friends are and no matter how amazing my boyfriend is.

Everything that’s happened has really only made me more confused about why my mother did what she did. I know she wanted to protect me, but the cost of it is difficult for me to understand.

Unfortunately, two therapy sessions in I had to face the hard truth that I may never understand her motivations or her reasons. I may just have to learn to live with it and find a way to move on and be better myself.

Which I'm determined to do. For me. For Noah. For Elana and Bella.

Elana finishes packing another box and passes it my way. "It feels like we've been doing this forever."

I can't really disagree with her. I didn't realize how much I had accumulated in my five years of owning Spicy Stacks, but it definitely wasn't this much. "And we're only halfway done." I rock back on my heels, looking around the space. "Maybe we should have had a sale after all." I pitched the idea of a moving sale to Noah, hoping it might reduce inventory and the cost of moving, but he refused and at the time I was a little relieved. Running a sale would have cut into my profits and I probably would have ended up saving just as much as I lost, making the whole thing a wash. A wash that would have left me with significantly less to pack up, but the effort of running a sale would have evened everything out again.

"It's okay. We'll get through it." I take a deep breath and go back to work.

The old me would have been frustrated by this entire process. Pissed that I was moving in the first place. Angry at Mauricio for being yet another man to fuck over a woman.

But I've turned a new leaf. Mostly.

I no longer immediately lump all men into the same category. Unfortunately, there are still so many that suck so much, and it makes it hard not to fall back into my old patterns and beliefs.

Luckily I have one very good reminder that I can't blanket blame an entire gender.

The door to the shop rattles, making me jump. We've got signs all over the windows that we're closed and moving, along with the address of our new location, but that hasn't

stopped people from trying to get in the locked door for the past week.

I lean to peek around the shelf Elana and I are packing up and smile as Noah gives me a grin through the glass. He holds up a bag of food, knowing exactly how to get me to let him in.

“Lunch has arrived.” I push up from the floor, holding one hand out to help Elana to her feet before going to unlock the door. Noah snags me the second he steps inside, pulling me in for a quick kiss before stepping away. He knows I don’t like to rub what we have in Elana’s face and is very conscious of it even though I know all he wants to do is pull me close and keep me there as long as he possibly can.

I never thought I was a touchy-feely person, but Noah’s making me realize physical affection isn’t as annoying as I always thought it was.

We all sit in the break room, using it for the last time as we enjoy the hot dogs and tater tots I’m guessing Noah got because he knows how much Elana likes Dave’s. She picks at her food before packing it up and loading it into the fridge and going back out to work.

Noah watches her go, waiting until she’s at the other end of the shop before leaning close. “How’s she doing?”

I lift one shoulder and let it fall. “Not as good as I would have expected considering her ex-husband is in jail for the foreseeable future.” It was my first thought after the shock of Austin’s attack wore off—Elana and Bella would be safe from him now.

And that outcome is worth everything that happened. All the soft tissue damage to my neck. The scratchy voice that took weeks to finally disappear. The nightmares and the lingering fear. I would go through every bit of it ten times over to keep him from hurting Elana and Bella again.

“Fear is a funny thing.” Noah’s hand slides over mine, his fingers stroking my skin. “It seems bad, but it’s really great at keeping you from seeing everything that’s hiding under it.”

Noah and I have spent many nights staying up late, talking about how we ended up who we were and a lot of what he admitted shocked the hell out of me.

I never thought someone like him would be so worried about judgment, which is wild considering I was one of the people judging him.

Because assholeness was one of the things hiding under my own fear.

I lean in and press my lips to Noah's, letting them linger a little longer now that Elana can't see us. I smile as I lean back. "How did you get so smart?"

He grins at me. "Must be all those Nicholas Sparks romances I read."

I've been working hard to be less of a bitch, but calling those books romances drags back the scowl I've worn for most of my life.

"There it is." Noah grabs my chair and hauls me closer. "I fucking love when you get that look on your face. I love proving I can be the one to get rid of it."

My frown is already softening. I can't help it. "I think there's something wrong with you."

"There's a lot of things wrong with me, remember?" He leans in to run his lips along the side of my neck. "But wanting to make you happy isn't one of them."

Noah's a people pleaser. He likes helping them. Making them smile. Showing them life can be good and empowering and fulfilling. I think it goes back to how much his life changed when he left his old job and moved to Florida. He wants everyone to feel the same happiness he does.

And somehow all that positivity is wearing off on me, which is why it's killing me to see Elana so unhappy.

"Maybe we should babysit so she can go out." I want to do for her what Noah did for me. I want to help her find her way through the mess other people have put on her so she can be happy.

“That’s a great plan, but you’re the only person she goes out with.” Noah reaches out to smooth back my hair, his touch a gentle constant that keeps me focused on what’s important. “So *I* should babysit and the two of you can go out.”

I push out my lower lip. “I don’t want to go out without you.” I’m not a social person and that’s one thing I don’t expect to change. I’m learning there’s a lot about myself I want to work on, but I don’t think I’ll ever be the kind of person to let just anyone into my life. I will always keep my circle small.

“Then I guess we’ll just have to mind our own business and let her figure it out for herself.” Noah curves his hands around my face. “How’s packing going?”

I sigh. “Boring.”

He smiles. “It will be worth it when you’re all set up in your new spot though.”

I manage to hold my frown a little longer. “I guess.”

Noah wiggles his brows at me, obviously eating up the opportunity to improve my outlook. “I hear you have a good-looking neighbor.”

I try to keep looking irritated, but I can’t keep it together with him grinning at me. “I hear he’s already taken.”

When we found out Mauricio wasn’t renewing my lease because he was selling the property, Noah managed to make a deal to get out of his own lease early. Apparently the new owners are planning to tear the place down so they were thrilled to have one less agreement to wait out.

“Definitely taken.” He kisses the tip of my nose and sighs. “I wish I could stay longer, but I’ve got to make sure everything’s going okay next door.”

“We’re going to be so sick of moving when all this is over.” I stand up when he stands up. “At least my apartment was easy.”

After Austin attacked me and we realized he was the one behind the break-in at my apartment, I was finally forced to

choose between going home or admitting that I was fine never going back again.

I picked the second one. Mostly. We still go back to my old building to visit Mr. Rigellio and the rest of my neighbors, checking in on them twice a week.

Between those check-ins and the classes Noah teaches at Shady Glen, we stay pretty damn busy taking care of Sweet Side's retirees, which is just fine with me. My circle has plenty of room for them, no matter how small I want to believe it is.

"Remember how happy you were when that was all moved?" Noah steps close to me. "You'll be just as happy when this is done."

"I know." I sigh again, dropping my head back to stare at the ceiling. "It's just a lot."

Noah leans into my ear, pulling my body tight to his. "If you get overwhelmed you can always come next door for a little relief."

The thought is tempting as hell.

"Ugh." I shove at his chest. "Then I'll never get this done." I push Noah toward the door. "Go. Get out of here so I can get back to work."

Noah's still grinning when I nudge him out onto the sidewalk. "I won't put any boxes on my desk just in case you change your mind."

I already know I'm going to, but I'm not telling him that.

I'll let my arrival be a surprise.

"Go back to work." I put on my best scowl since I know how hot it makes him. "You've got a whole gym to pack up and move."

He reaches back through the gap in the door, claiming my mouth in a kiss that makes me consider chasing him next door right now.

Noah licks his lips as he pulls back, tipping my chin with one finger as he steps away. "Love you, Jilly Bean."

It's stupid how much I love that corny nickname.

It's almost as much as I love that corny man.

Even if he has read Nicholas Sparks.



Thank you so much for reading *By the Book*. I had so much fun writing a grumpy girl and the sunshiney man that finally makes her smile.

I've got a hilarious bonus scene up on my website featuring Noah, Jillian, and Sylvia and the rest of her gang.

And maybe that toy Noah bought in chapter twenty...

[You can read it here!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Janice Whiteaker writes romance as herself, her romantic suspense pen name Jemma Westbrook, and her brand new romcom pen name Josie Watts.

Her stories are low-angst and filled with girl power.

Janice lives in southwestern Ohio with her husband, three savage children, and a few too many chickens.

[Join her readers group to keep up with the latest cover reveals, and read teasers you won't find anywhere else.](#)



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