

BERSERKR GYM SERIES BOOK 1

COME
IN WITH THE
RAIN

B. RANDALL

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BERSERKR GYM

BOOK 1

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For Jeremy

my very own sexy contractor

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CONTENT WARNING

This book contains depictions of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It also includes mature language and graphic sexual content intended only for adults.

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COME IN WITH THE RAIN

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CHAPTER 1

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STELLA

Mickey has one of my arms pinned behind my back and a hand wrapped in my hair when the doorbell sounds, and I'm suddenly looking up into the faces of three men on the screen in front of me as Mickey's thrusts stutter to a halt.

"Shit." Mickey quickly pulls out of me and reaches over to the nightstand to shut off the security screens on the wall. They all go black so that I'm no longer staring at every empty room in the condo like I have been since Mickey flipped me onto my stomach and pushed into me from behind ten minutes ago.

He's already sliding off the bed, leaving me naked and empty and quivering right on the edge of orgasm. "Contractors," he says by way of explanation as I roll onto my back and watch him pull up his pants, the faded jeans he only wears at home. The sweat on my skin starts to go cold, but my tired muscles refuse to move, so I stay where I am, in the center of our California-king bed.

Mickey flings the bedroom door open and doesn't quite pull it completely shut behind him. I can still see out into the hall, just a sliver. "I'm coming!" he shouts down the hallway as the doorbell sounds again. I run a hand down one of my bare thighs. Apparently, he's the only one coming.

The front door opens, and I listen as Mickey greets the men who will be renovating the condo. The renovations were Mickey's idea. There's nothing wrong with the kitchen, with its Spanish marble countertops and voice-command fridge, but

Mickey insisted a week ago that he was bored of looking at the same cabinets every day, and that's Mickey—into something until he's not anymore. And once he wanted a new kitchen, he wanted a new everything.

I hear Mickey's voice as he leads the men down the hallway, toward the guest bathroom that's just outside our bedroom door. As unfamiliar voices answer him, I'm reminded why I didn't want to do this in the first place: complete strangers in my home, in my personal space.

I sloppily cover myself with the edge of the sheet just as several shadows pass in front of that sliver in the doorway. But one of the shadows stops, a tall frame taking up the entire opening, and I look up into a face I've never seen before. In a split second, the man—tall, blonde, and extremely V-shaped—meets my eye before I can cover the rest of myself and then turns his face away. I know he got a good look at what I didn't manage to cover, the tops of my breasts, my freshly waxed legs, and definitely my bare ass.

I'm frozen, a deer caught in headlights, feeling my cheeks burn in horror before he scuttles away, moving into the bathroom with all the other shadows. I bury my face in the comforter the second he's gone, but the expression on his face—wide-eyed shock—is burned into my retinas. Holy shit. I can't believe that just happened.

I'm still laying there a few minutes later when hurried footsteps make their way down the hall toward me. I can imagine the scene already: Mickey coming into the bedroom and telling me he's run out of time, that he really needs to get to work, and can I finish myself off?

Instead, Mickey shuts the door, and in moments, he's back: back with me, back in bed, and back between my legs. He throws the sheet off me and unzips his pants.

"Mickey," I hiss, glancing to make sure he closed the door all the way this time. "There are people." He clearly has no idea that one of the men he's paying just saw his girlfriend completely bare-assed, but the image of that man is seared in

my brain, and it feels entirely wrong to even be considering carrying on with Mickey after that.

Mickey shrugs and pulls his cock out of his open fly. He knows I won't argue now that it's come back into play. Mickey has the best cock that I've ever had inside me, and he knows it. I whispered it to him the first time we were together, when I was delirious with the need to come and the knowledge that he was going to make sure it happened. Even looking at me now, after three years, he's got a smirk at the corner of his mouth, stroking himself from root to tip to get hard again, still wet from me.

“You done with me, Princess?”

I shake my head, my brain reacquainting itself with the throb between my legs. I try to wipe my brain, shake it clean like an Etch a Sketch.

“Yeah, I didn't think so.”

He pushes into me so deep that I whine and then cover my mouth, but Mickey yanks my hand away. Without a word, he fucks me into the mattress.

Here is the thing about the famous Mickey Kline, owner and CEO of Kline Corp: he knows how to fuck. As in, he knows where to put his fingers and his tongue and his dick. He knows how to make a woman come with a technical precision that's almost alarming. But after three years, it's a bit like having sex with an automaton. He's pumping into me, but his eyes are on the floor, and I can practically see the wheels in his head turning with thoughts of things that have nothing to do with me: drone technology and Chinese AIs and coding the likes of which I'll never be able to decipher.

“Need help?” he asks, clearly noticing that I've stopped making end-of-sex sounds. I'm too focused on the thumping footsteps of the contractors down the hall. I glance at the closed door, seeing again in my mind that man with the broad shoulders. I imagine his arms and his shoulders flexing as he pries up the bathroom tile just as Mickey reaches down and rubs my clit hard enough to make me see stars.

“Fuck,” I shout, throwing my head back. And then he starts to drive.

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CHAPTER 2

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ADAM

I've got my prybar wedged between the countertop and the cabinet in Mickey Kline's hallway bathroom when the shouting starts. Shawn stops trying to remove the clawfoot tub from the tile floor and sighs.

I look over at him, my hands still wrapped around the end of the prybar. "Is that...?"

A woman screams, and it's unmistakably the scream of someone who just had an orgasm. We're listening to Mickey Kline fuck his girlfriend, and she's howling like a banshee. I feel a flush run up my ears. I didn't mean to look. I didn't mean to see so much of Stella Hart, *the* Stella Hart. The door was cracked, and my eyes went there without meaning to. And she was there, all that pale, creamy flesh, laid out naked on the sheets like some kind of Greek goddess.

All my blood rushes down to my groin, and I grip my prybar tighter.

"I hate it when clients do that." Shawn gives the tub one more upward tug. The feet on one end unstick from the tile with a crack. "Makes me feel like a pervert. Doesn't someone like Kline have anything better to do at nine in the morning?"

I raise an eyebrow in his direction. "Better than getting laid?"

Shawn moves to the other end of the tub with a shake of his buzzed head. "Point taken. Especially if I had a piece like her in my bed every morning."

I freeze mid-pry. Stella Hart. I know her face from Google headlines and Ford's Instagram. Ever since Ford, my best friend, discovered how many gorgeous women post bikini selfies on social media, he's become a firm believer in Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. And even though Stella Hart doesn't post bikini selfies, she does post videos of herself in outfits that show off her long legs and the shape of her body. When I'm at the gym with him, Ford always points his phone screen at me to share his half-naked female bounty, and more than once, it has been Stella Hart in a dress that didn't reach very far down her thighs or leggings that outlined every curve of her.

And yeah, okay, I have looked at Stella Hart's body with intense male interest, but I'm always drawn to her face, too. Her bow-shaped lips and her high cheek bones and her flat nose, so pretty I have a hard time tearing my eyes from her. And now I'll forever have a hard time not remembering what she looks like all rumped and wearing absolutely nothing but the corner of a sheet that just barely covers her breasts.

On the other side of the wall, a shower turns on, and my blood goes hot. Stella Hart. Wet from head to toe. Scrubbing herself clean.

Their bedroom door opens with a *whoosh*, and I turn my head in time to see Mickey Kline step into the hall. He sticks his head into the bathroom and claps one hand on the doorway. "Thanks, boys," he says, before continuing down the hall.

Shawn looks over at me, his eyes narrowed. "Why did that feel like an insult?"

I pry up a corner of the countertop and stop to regain my footing before going again. "Because you hate rich people, you're intimidated by confident men, and you're paranoid."

Shawn blinks at me from the other side of the huge bathroom. "That was a low blow, man."

I shrug and put my weight on the prybar, feeling that deep satisfaction I always get when the glue holding it together starts to make a crunchy tearing noise. I love to rip stuff apart almost as much as I love to put it back together.

A few minutes later, more footsteps travel down the hall toward us, this time the slap of bare feet, and I can't seem to keep myself from spinning around to watch as Stella Hart's petite form appears in the doorway. Her hair is wet and her face without make-up when she stops and looks in at me. She knows I was the one who saw her, and I can't tell from the way she's schooling her expression if I embarrassed her or not, but she clearly didn't mention my mistake to Kline, so that's something.

She doesn't say anything, just takes me in for a second, before bowing her head and continuing on down the hall at a slightly faster pace.

Shawn rushes to the doorway to peek out, but I stay put, focusing on the countertop, trying to figure out if Stella Hart is on her way to tell my boss that I ogled her. Maybe she doesn't even know it was an accident.

"Yoga pants," Shawn says, ducking back into the bathroom and making a sound in his throat like he just took a bite of a sweet apple pie.

"Don't be gross," I bark at him, and he just grins.

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CHAPTER 3

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STELLA

“**D**id he see you like, completely naked? Full frontal?”

I cringe when Abby says it out loud like that, even though she’s trying to keep her voice down and we’re out on the sidewalk, where the wind will just blow the words away. “No, but he definitely got a very good view of my ass.”

“And then all your hot contractors heard your hot boyfriend pound you into oblivion?”

I roll my eyes and dip a finger into the whipped cream on top of my mocha. “I had to walk through the condo afterward with all of them staring. And the one that saw me naked made, like, prolonged eye contact with me. And I never said they were hot.” To be honest, I didn’t even really look at them. After all the culminating embarrassment, I couldn’t look any of them in the eye, so I don’t really even know what any of them looked like. Except for the one who saw me in bed. He was right there in the bathroom when I went out to grab breakfast, watching me with those blue eyes, and I was so *aware* that he saw so much of me that I couldn’t even say anything to him.

“How many?” Abby waves to someone behind me, and I’m reminded that her break was technically over five minutes ago.

“Four in the kitchen, two in the bathroom.”

Abby squints like she’s doing math in her head. “Logic tells me that there has to be at least one hot one in the bunch.

It's basically the balance of the universe. Was the one who saw you in the nude hot?"

Don't picture him. Don't picture him. Don't picture him. I keep my brain blank. Because yes. God, yes. He was hot. All muscle and bronze skin and pouty lips. I ignore her question. "Someone is going to report to the internet that I'm horny or that I like to flash people. That's what people do."

Abby leans her elbows on the table between us. "Okay, first of all, you *are* horny, and there's nothing wrong with that. And second, I would bet a million dollars that your little peeping friend isn't going to say a word to anyone because he's secretly hoping it'll happen again."

I groan and bury my face in my hands. "Don't even joke like that." From the way he blushed and scurried away, he didn't seem like the type to sneak around every corner, hoping for another glimpse.

"Maybe I'm not joking," Abby says, wearing her best smirk. "Maybe *you* want it to happen again. Did you even tell Mickey about it?"

I send her a horrified look. "Of course I didn't tell Mickey. He would probably murder the poor guy, who didn't even mean to see anything in the first place." Not to mention that as soon as Mickey did that thing where he pinches my clit, hits my G-spot, and pulls my hair, all at the same time, I forgot all about the hunky contractor seeing my ass until I was passing by him in the hall, all six feet of him.

"Maybe if Mr. Millionaire knew other guys were interested, he would pay more attention to you," Abby says, so casually, like she's commenting on the fact that autumn is just around the corner.

"Abby," I growl. "It's not like the guy asked me out for dinner and a movie, okay? I am in a committed relationship."

Abby's face loses its humor, which makes nerves settle in my stomach. "Stella, you don't have to stay with him."

I wave a hand, trying to be casual about it, but I can't meet her eyes anymore. "I'm perfectly content with my life."

Her thick, red-painted lips pull into a line. “Perfectly content is a perfectly sad way to spend your life just because someone pays your bills and fucks you good.”

An image flashes across my mind: Mickey panting above me, staring at the headboard while he hits me so deep that I’m keening, thinking about some email he has to write or some program he needs to get back to. And as soon as it’s over, he’s gone. Back to work and back to ignoring me until bedtime.

“Yeah, and flirting with any random man who steps into my home just because he accidentally saw me naked is a perfectly sad way to completely fuck up my life.”

Abby looks shocked, like I kicked her under the little round café table. “I’m not talking about the contractor anymore. I’m talking about what you want.” She settles back into her chair, putting her red Riverside Coffee apron on display, her little white nametag that reads **MANAGER ABBY TATE** clipped to it.

“I love Mickey,” I say, feeling defensive even though Abby and I are always careful to skirt around potential arguments. “He just doesn’t live in the same universe as us.”

“Yeah, that much is obvious. I should get back to work.” She glances at the clock on her cell phone, and I know I’ve made her mad. Or at least frustrated her in some way. Stella Hart: walking disappointment.

CHAPTER 4

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ADAM

Mickey Kline owns a two-story, five-bedroom condo made of marble and glass, right on the Patapsco River.

I don't know exact numbers, but from experience, I can only assume that a place like this in Baltimore has to be worth close to six million. If Mickey Kline was just the CEO of a company he built himself, perhaps he wouldn't be the most famous CEO on the East Coast, but Mickey Kline started his multi-billion dollar robotics company in an abandoned warehouse in Cherry Hill when he was fifteen, and he continues to be the leading mind in robotics in the Northern Hemisphere. Add in that the guy also has a famous six-pack, and he sort of blows all us other guys out of the water.

And I'm standing in his very large, very expensively furnished living room, covered in caulk and thin-set, when his beautiful girlfriend returns. I see her in the bank of screens on the wall first, stopping just outside the front door and taking a deep breath before coming inside. As soon as the door closes behind her, she spots me standing at the end of the hallway, and for a second she looks shocked, her mouth popping open on a gasp so slight that I don't hear it so much as see it. There must be close to two hundred feet of hardwood floor between us, but our eyes meet, and unlike before, she doesn't look away, doesn't blush or stammer. She doesn't waver.

Adrenaline starts to pulse through me. Should I apologize to her? Should I look away so she doesn't think I'm some sort of creep who's going to stalk her? I should look away. Now, maybe? Now? *Now?*

“What’s your name?” She has such a quiet voice, like she knows she doesn’t need to speak too loudly for people to listen, and a hint of a Northern accent, though I can’t put my finger on an exact area.

“Adam Lake, ma’am.”

At that, she snorts and walks across the living room toward where I’m still standing frozen. When she’s only a few feet from me, she stops. “I don’t think anyone has ever called me ma’am before. Maybe the tellers at the bank.”

From somewhere behind me, Shawn says, “Adam is very old-fashioned.” I had no idea he was back there. Did he see her come in? Did he see her notice me? Did he see the way she stopped in her tracks?

“Right.” She laughs this little breath of a laugh. It’s a sound that has my eyes lowering to her mouth, like a heat-seeking missile. *Not for you*, my rational mind whispers.

I’m immediately plagued with thoughts of this morning: Mickey Kline answering the door in nothing but jeans and his sweat, that banging of the headboard, the sound of her screams, the expanse of her long beautiful legs and the roundness of her ass.

“And you are?” Stella steps around me to address Shawn.

“Shawn Meyers.”

“It’s nice to meet you both,” she says. I wonder if Shawn can see it, the way her eyes convey this bizarre secret that we have between the two of us. Even if I wanted to apologize now, I’ve missed my opportunity. I can’t do it with Shawn standing right next to me. I don’t want anyone to know what I saw, don’t want to give anyone the chance to turn it into something it wasn’t.

She steps politely around us and disappears down the hallway toward her bedroom. I watch her go, the sway of her hair and her dress and those hips that I know the shape of under those clothes. *Not for you*.

“Adam, man, what are you doing?” Shawn asks, his voice pitched low.

“Nothing.” I turn without looking at him, stomping past him and into the bathroom.

“Like hell you’re not doing anything,” he grumbles, following me.

“I was just talking to her.” I stay focused on what I’m doing, caulking the new sink I just put in.

“Sure,” Shawn says from somewhere behind me. “But making googly eyes at your client’s girlfriend is the fastest way to get your ass sacked.”

“Would you fucking lay off?” I growl at him, finally looking up. He’s standing beside me, his own caulk gun in his hand, and for a moment, I see a flash of him in Marine colors, an M27 IRA in his hand, baking in the sun. But that’s not right. Shawn wasn’t there. He wasn’t a Marine. I shake the thought away and go back to the sink.

“Just looking out for you, man,” Shawn says, and this time, his voice has gone soft.

“Yeah, I know,” I say down into the sink.

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CHAPTER 5

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ADAM

A *dam, man, what are you doing?*

I stare down at the forms in front of me. *Application for Home Improvement Commission Original License*. I've had the damn thing printed and sitting on my table for a week, but I haven't been able to bring myself to fill it out. It feels like a pipe dream. Without a client base, it'll take years after starting my own business before I'm making as much as I'm making at Cylburn Repair, and I can't afford to be without that income.

I toss the application aside and get up from the table, going to the fridge and grabbing a beer. I lean my head back against the closed fridge and close my eyes only for them to pop open again. Ever since the incident yesterday morning, every time I close my eyes, all I see is *her*.

Which is absolutely preposterous. I'm not this guy. I'm not the kind of guy who sees a woman mostly naked once and then harbors a crush for the rest of his fucking life. But, well, I was already halfway to a crush before I even walked into Kline's place yesterday, and then seeing her in all her absolutely gorgeous glory just made the whole thing worse.

But Shawn is right. I can't be going anywhere near her. I can't have a reputation for developing crushes on clients. How the hell would I ever be able to start a business if I was known as some creep?

Do I even *want* to start a business? Who the hell knows.

I reach into my pocket for my phone and open Google. I know I shouldn't. It's just going to get me in trouble. But I can't help myself. I'm like an addict who needs a fix.

I type *Stella Hart* into the search engine and watch as pictures of her take over my screen. It's not like she's a movie star or anything, but she's been seen on Mickey's arm enough that she's famous, even if it's just on the East Coast. Everyone here knows Mickey, so everyone here knows his girlfriend.

There are pictures of them together, and there are pictures of her alone, some of them I recognize from social media and others were clearly taken by strangers, out in the wild. Pictures of her with shopping bags in her hands or sitting at a coffee shop or putting gas in her car.

And what's creepier, the people who took the photos or the guy standing alone in his kitchen, looking at them?

I turn my screen off and let out a long sigh. It's a dumb crush. I don't even know anything about her other than how beautiful she is, and that she has a great laugh, and that she's kind enough not to tell her soul-destroying boyfriend that I was seemingly spying on her yesterday. At least, she probably hasn't told him. Yet.

I glance over at the forms on my table. Maybe I just need to get out of there.

CHAPTER 6

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STELLA

“**Y**ou’re up.” Mickey comes in from the bathroom, a towel slung low on his hips, hair dripping onto his muscular shoulders. I know he works out. There’s a corner of his office downstairs that’s all cardio machines and free weights, but I’ve never actually witnessed it. I imagine that’s what he does on his lunch breaks when he stays down there instead of coming up to the second floor. His muscle tone is subtle, cut lightly behind his tan skin, and I can’t take my eyes off the hard abdominal muscle around his belly button.

“Yeah,” I say, watching him from the bed as he steps into the massive closet and disappears. I swear, there’s a doorway to Narnia in there somewhere. I see the contractors step up to our front door on the camera monitors on the TV, lunch boxes and coffee thermoses in their hands. Most of their supplies gets left here every night, pressed subtly into corners and covered with tarps. I watch as they all crowd in around the door while the guy in charge rings the doorbell. It sounds throughout the condo, but I don’t move and Mickey keeps dressing in the closet.

In the back corner of the screen, Adam appears, his head bowed and his hands behind his back as he leans against the hallway wall. He hunches his massive shoulders, and I see in my mind again the shape of him in the crack in the door, looking in at me. It couldn’t have been more than three seconds, but it feels like the moment stretched out into hours.

All the other contractors are looking at the door, waiting for Mickey or me to open it, but after a beat passes, Adam's head comes up. He looks at the door, and then, like he knows I'm watching, he looks straight at the camera.

I fumble for the remote and turn the TV off, all the little screens going black.

"I should go let them in," Mickey sighs, coming out of the closet, dressed for the day. He rolls the sleeves up on his shirt as he walks toward the bedroom door, but once he has it open, he stops. I think maybe he's forgotten something, but with one hand still on the doorknob, he looks at me over his shoulder. "Are you happy with everything, Stella?"

I just blink at him. What does that question even mean? Does he mean am I happy *here, with him*? That can't be what he meant because him asking me that question means opening a book that would be better left closed. No, he must mean, am I happy with the work that's being done?

"Of course," I say, putting on a bright smile. "I can't wait to see everything when it's all finished."

His eyes scan my face from across the room, trying to read me the way he reads his computer and his calculations and his machines.

I look away, reach for my phone on the nightstand. "The tile you chose for the bathroom is flawless," I say.

I know he'll like the compliment to his taste. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him smile. "I thought you might like that. Adds a little something."

I pull the blanket up higher, until it's tucked under my chin. "I like it. Almost makes me want to start using that bathroom."

He raps his fingers on the door. "Use whatever bathroom you like, Stella."

The comment makes sadness build up at the back of my throat, and I can't even say why. Mickey walks out of the room and closes the door behind himself.

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CHAPTER 7

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ADAM

I'm caulking the new sink, listening to Shawn's music echoing off the walls of the mostly empty bathroom, when there are gunshots. I drop my caulk gun and fall to the ground, covering my head. Gunshots. Why are there gunshots in Mickey Kline's condo? Where's Stella?

"Get down!" I shout at Shawn. "Get down!"

I tell myself to move from where I am, flat on the tile floor, my arms over my head, but I can't. I can't stop shaking. If I try to move now, my legs won't be steady enough to hold me. I clench my hands into fists and try to make myself open my eyes to see where Shawn is. To see what's going on.

"Adam," I hear Shawn say, his voice quiet beneath the ringing in my ears.

"Stay down!" I shout back. "I don't know where it's coming from."

"Where what's coming from, man?"

I want to look him in the eye and try to make sense of his words, but my forehead is pressed to the cold tile, the muscles in my shoulders and arms stiff, holding me down. Didn't he hear the gunshots?

"Adam?"

When I hear her quiet voice, my whole body goes cold, like someone has dumped ice water over my head. Stella Hart doesn't have military training. She doesn't know how to protect herself in a battle zone. She's vulnerable, out in the

open. It's enough to finally get my body to move. I uncover my head, using every ounce of strength I have to do so.

"Adam, what's—" She's right there, right next to me, and I've grabbed her before I'm even aware I'm doing it. I pull her to the ground, covering the entirety of her body with the entirety of mine.

"You're safe," I say, so close that my mouth brushes the impossibly soft skin of her ear. I feel the quiver that runs through her. She's terrified. "It's okay. You're safe."

And then she turns her head, her face so close to mine that it's a blur of eyelashes and freckles. She comes into sharp focus, and I realize there's no fear in her eyes. She's not looking up at me like someone who's just encountered a gun. She's looking at me with pity, and that makes everything in me go even colder, until my chest feels hollowed out and empty.

"Adam," she whispers, breath puffing out against my lips. "Everyone is safe. It was just a drill. A power drill. We're okay."

I can't move, petrified in place by the realization of what I've done in front of her, in front of Shawn. Slowly I move, untangling our limbs and pushing up and away from her warmth until I'm sitting back on my heels. She sits up, fixing the hem of her dress that's ridden up her thighs. Holy God, what she must think of me right now, pushing her down onto the floor like that, pressing myself to her so inappropriately. Especially after what happened yesterday morning.

"I'm sorry," I say, tripping over my words. "Ms. Hart, I'm so, so sorry."

"What the hell is going on here?"

I turn in time to see my boss push through the guys crowded around the doorway. I don't know how long they've been standing there.

The bathroom is completely silent, the buzz of the music from earlier gone, replaced with the sound of my breathing and Stella's quiet shuffling as she scrambles up off the floor. I

stay where I am, on my knees. It seems easier that way, somehow.

“Ms. Hart,” my boss says, his voice significantly softer now. “Has Adam done something that—”

“No,” Stella answers immediately, lacing her fingers together in front of her and finally shifting her gaze away from me. “It was just an accident. Adam did nothing wrong.”

I slowly look over my shoulder again, noticing Shawn up against the wall opposite me, a power drill in his hand and a stricken expression on his face. He must have drilled too hard into the wall. When the screw can't move anymore, it makes an abrasive, bucking kind of noise. Like a gunshot.

“We're very sorry to have disturbed you,” my boss goes on, nodding his head in this weirdly reverent way, like Stella is a nineteenth-century duchess or something. “It won't happen again.”

Stella puts up her hands. Her hair is mussed, but it just makes her look even more beautiful. “Truly not a problem.” Her eyes flicker to me, completely unreadable, and then she quickly exits the room.

As soon as she's gone, the guys start to whisper, and my boss stomps over to me. He bends, so that his face is inches from mine, and hisses, “I don't know what you did, but you're on thin ice. Don't go near Stella Hart again, or you're fucking done here.” He straightens, the stiff bones of his knees cracking, and barks, “Get back to work!”

He marches away, taking the rest of the crew with him, and I'm left there, still kneeling on the floor, Shawn watching me from the other side of the room.

Everything is still chaos, the ringing in my ears and the way my pulse is racing, fueled by adrenaline. I press my hands into the tile and take a deep breath. The world is blurry, but I can see her there in front of me, like she's real, clear as day. Stella, with her eyes so close that I could see every color in them.

I slam my eyes closed and shake it off. The image of her is gone when I open them. She's gone, somewhere in the depths of the condo, not still here in my arms.

"You okay?" Shawn reaches out a hand to help me up, and I take it.

"Yeah," I say, even though I'm not sure I've ever been further from okay.

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CHAPTER 8

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STELLA

I watch Mickey laugh, the way he throws back his head, his face full of glee. I can't tell when it's real and when it's not anymore. I used to be able to.

“Stella.”

I turn and smile at the woman whose name I absolutely should remember, but I don't. She works for Mickey; everyone here does. These are the people who run his boards and manage his properties and make foreign deals with Kline Corp investors. And this woman, dressed in a black gown that flows all the way down to the floor, is someone who I know I've met before, probably at the last event Mickey threw for his top people. I always come to the events.

“Hello,” I say, handing the woman the untouched champagne in my hand and signaling for a new glass. “Are you having a good time?”

“Absolutely,” the woman says. “We always do. Mickey really knows how to throw a party.”

I chuckle politely. “Yes, he does.” Complete with a string quartet, gift bags for the guests, and a four-course meal. You would think he was preparing to welcome the President of the United States, but I suspect that he likes to throw these massive soirees because it makes people like the woman I'm speaking to now giddy over a night of luxury.

Mickey chooses that moment to look my way, and something on my face must convince him to come over because he makes his way across the room as the woman I'm

talking to gets distracted by a familiar face over my shoulder. When Mickey gets to me, he wraps one warm hand around my elbow and leads me away from the crowd, off to a quiet corner.

“You okay?” he asks, examining my face, and I feel something thick settle at the base of my throat. When I first started seeing Mickey, he was attentive. He noticed when something was wrong. He gave me attention when I was craving it. But when was the last time he looked directly at me, instead of right past me, like this? I press a hand to his stubbled cheek.

“Yeah, I’m okay.” It’s not exactly the truth, but it’s okay for now. I don’t want to burden him with this growing feeling I’ve had in my stomach all night. This feeling like I’m not really here, like I’m a sort of living statue that’s been paid to stand in the corner, occasionally addressed by people who most likely refer to me as “Mickey’s girlfriend” when I’m not around, instead of my actual name.

“Did something weird happen with the contractors today?”

His words are so unexpected that I jerk a little in his hold. All evening, I’ve been running through the events of this afternoon in my head. Hearing Adam shout through the walls of my bedroom, finding him on the bathroom floor with his hands over his head like a bomb was about to go off, Shawn showing me the power drill with that devastatingly confused look on his face. Adam pulling me to the ground, covering my body with his, looking at me with so much fear that my heart broke. I can still feel the heat of him, every powerful ridge of muscle holding me down, his breath huffing out in that rhythmic way that made me sweat.

“Who told you something happened?” I imagine Adam’s boss, the way his face was red with anger by the time he got to the bathroom, even though Adam was clearly experiencing side effects of some kind of PTSD. Would Adam’s boss go to Mickey? Would he rat out his own contractor?

Mickey shrugs. He’s not looking directly at me anymore. He’s scanning the room. “No one. Happened to catch some of

the commotion on the monitors.” He must have seen me go into the bathroom, or maybe just all the guys gathering around the doorway. He definitely didn’t see what happened *inside* the bathroom. There are no cameras in there.

I see his jaw work for a moment, the way it does when he’s frustrated and trying to maintain strict control over himself, but he keeps his eyes trained on his guests. “They’re not giving you any trouble, are they?”

My face flushes. Mickey may be quiet and focused and gentle, but if he thought any of those contractors was messing with me, he would come for them in a big way. And Mickey can ruin anyone’s life with a few phone calls.

I quickly shake my head. “No. They’ve all been very nice. Adam just had some trouble today.” Mickey’s eyes shoot to me, and I know it’s because I’ve mentioned Adam by his first name. It’s not impolite but I guess unexpected. Why should I know any of their names? Why should I be speaking to them at all?

Mickey’s gaze roves over my face, and I have no idea what he can see there. If he can tell that ever since the men went home earlier, I haven’t stopped thinking about *him*: how tall he is, how unbearably handsome, with his short blond hair and square jaw and chest so broad that it pushes against the front of his t-shirt, all the way down where his muscled torso disappears into his jeans. Haven’t stopped thinking about the fact that having his arms around me, even in his moment of distress, was the most exciting and intimate thing that’s happened to me in a long time.

I take a deep breath and smile back at Mickey, leaning in to press a kiss to his cheek. “We should go spend time with our guests.” He doesn’t stop me when I walk away.

CHAPTER 9

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ADAM

Berserkr Gym is quiet. I can't recall when the music blasting out of the four-foot tower speakers at the back of the room stopped, but it did, and it's only now that my brain has finally given me a rest that I realize Ford is watching me. I wish I could say I'm not sure how I missed him standing there all six feet four inches and two hundred fifty pounds of muscle of him leaning against the wall. But I do know.

I missed him because I've spent the last two hours thinking about Stella, punching all the way through the wrap around my knuckles. Stella naked in bed. Stella pressed to her bathroom floor. Stella stopping outside her own door to brace herself before coming inside. It's like I'm strapped to a chair with my eyes taped open, and someone is force-feeding me footage of her.

"What's wrong, amigo?" Ford asks when I've grabbed onto my swinging punching bag with both hands to still it. He offers me my water bottle. I take it and pop the lid open.

"Nothing's wrong," I pant. I can feel the sweat going cold on my lower back, my stomach, my chest.

Ford nods, his arms crossed, showing off his tattooed skin. "Right," he says in his gruff English accent. "Nothing's wrong, and that's why you're here, beating the stuffing out of my punching bag at"—he consults the clock on the wall—"11:28 at night."

I run a sweaty hand down my sweaty face, accomplishing nothing. “Shit, man. I didn’t realize. I’m sorry.” I glance behind me, and sure enough, the rest of the boxing gym is empty. Not even Danika, Ford’s business partner and our mutual best friend, is lurking around.

Ford claps one hand on my shoulder hard enough to make me wince. “It’s fine. It’s not like I wasn’t going to be here late anyway, living upstairs and all, but you’ve got to find a healthier way to sort through your shit.”

Yeah. I definitely need to find a way to sort through all the shit I brought home from Afghanistan so I don’t end up in the fetal position on the floor because Shawn ran a power drill too close to me.

Ford nods toward the ring in the middle of the gym, and I smirk over at him. “You sure about that?”

He lifts one menacing eyebrow. When we were overseas, he caught a piece of shrapnel with his left eye. It’s now a milky white, a scar stretching from above his eyebrow all the way down to his pronounced cheekbone. He’d already looked like a badass before, but the scar makes him look like he could gouge your eyes out with a spoon at the slightest provocation. Luckily, no one knows that inside he’s made of marshmallow fluff.

We climb into the ring, and Ford immediately puts his fists up. He already has his training gloves on. He came out here looking for a fight. He throws the first punch, and he’s not pulling it. I duck out of the way and land a jab to his solar plexus before straightening.

He grunts and shuffles back to put space between us. “Tell me what’s going on.” On the last gruff word, he swings at me, but when I go to dodge, he throws a left hook, catching me in the ear. For a second, the world is a ringing bell.

When I’ve managed to shake it off, Ford is still bouncing on his toes, waiting for me to make a move. “We’ve been best friends for almost a decade. I’m not interested in your silent caveman bullshit.”

I go for his jaw. He dodges and shoulders me back until I bounce on the ropes.

“It’s not caveman bullshit,” I spit out. Ford cried when his last girlfriend dumped him, with his head on my shoulder in the middle of a bar, moments before singing a teary karaoke version of “I Will Survive.” That’s his style, not mine, and we both know it. “It’s just not important.”

Ford drops his arms and points at me. “There it is. It’s not that there’s nothing. You just don’t think it’s important enough to share. I know differently.”

I drop my fists, too. “How?”

“You have that same, far off look in your eyes that you got in that tent in Afghanistan when you got your last phone call from Suzie.”

Suzie, my high school sweetheart and fiancé. At least she was when I got deployed. She called me when I was eight months in to tell me she wasn’t cut out to be a military wife after all and that she’d met someone else. Six months later, we were sent home. Only, I didn’t have a home to go back to because both my parents died while I was overseas, and all that was left was Ford’s couch until all the paperwork on my parents’ house was done.

I feel it now again, the way I feel every time someone mentions Suzie or my parents, the way I lost everything and came back to nothing. It was like stepping into a time machine and blasting forward a hundred years, just enough time for everyone you know and love to be gone.

Ford paces back until the length of the ring is between us and wraps his hands around the ropes behind him. “I don’t need that zombie back, friend. He was no fun.”

I put my fists back up, widen my stance, invite him into my space, and he comes because he knows I’m not going to tell him the truth while we’re both leaning on the sides. I need us to be moving, not gazing into each other’s eyes. Ford crouches low, preparing for me to throw the first punch, so I land a kick instead, getting him in the chest and knocking him

off balance, but he bounces back, kicking my leg out from under me, so that I'm on my back, staring up at the ceiling. He stands over me, blocking out the light with his massive frame.

I want to bite back the truth. I don't want to let it out past my teeth. "I've been spending a lot of time thinking about someone I shouldn't be thinking about."

He stares down at me, expressionless, and then reaches down a hand to help me to my feet. He shakes his head. "Adam, only you would be so goddamned messed up in your head over *thoughts*. Is she married?"

"She might as well be."

"But she isn't."

I put both hands on my hips, bending over a little, feeling all that time on the bag catching up to me. She might not be married, but she's with *Mickey Kline*. Not to mention... "She saw me have an episode."

Ford knows what that's like. He's been through it as much as I have, those horrific moments when downtown Baltimore becomes a mirror image of that war zone, every car honk or door slam like a machine gun, every overloud voice the pop of a grenade.

Ford sighs. "What did she do?"

Her green eyes looked at me. Her small hands clutched at my shirt. Her feminine mouth stood up for me to my boss. But then she left, and for all I know, she went to Mickey and told him that she didn't want to be left alone with me, that I was a safety hazard.

"Hard to say."

I know that's not an answer he was expecting, but he doesn't question it. He just nods and comes over to pat me on the shoulder. "Guess you'll just have to get over yourself then, mate. If she didn't run screaming, then you're probably not the horror show you've made yourself believe you are."

CHAPTER 10

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ADAM

The next day, I don't see Stella Hart at all. I can only assume she isn't home, unless she stayed in bed all day and didn't feel the need to come out for food. As Shawn and I work on the bathroom, the knowledge that she could be gone because of me and my episode prickles at the back of my neck. What if I scared her away?

It isn't until after work, when I'm in line at the corner market by my house, that I realize I left my wallet at Mickey's place. I get to the register and reach for it, but an image immediately flashes through my mind: taking it out to give Shawn money to get us some lunch and then getting distracted by a leak under the sink before I put it back. I left it there on the edge of the counter.

If Kline's place was across town, I would just leave it until tomorrow. But I live close to Mickey and Stella, on the literal other side of the tracks, in Pigtown, less than ten minutes away. I never really noticed before, but you can see Kline's building from the front windows of my house. Off in the distance with its face pointing out toward the river is the high rise, all gleaming windows in the sun, Mickey's condo right at the top.

Last night, I stared out my window while I ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, knowing that even when this job is over, she'll still be there right in my line of vision, always.

I get in my truck, glancing at the time as I head back to Mickey's place. The guys and I have been off less than half an hour.

No one answers when I ring the bell. I know they have those cameras on. They're always on, surveilling everything in the condo, so I wave up at the camera pointed down at me from the ceiling. But no one comes. I ring the doorbell again. I'm not exactly supposed to just let myself back in, but I need my wallet, and I figure no one will even know. Mickey is probably still down in his office, the way he always is, and Stella's car wasn't in its spot when I parked in the garage down below.

The condo is silent, like I knew it would be, as I push open the door, still unlocked from when the crew left. I rush in, heading straight for the guest bathroom and snatching my wallet off the sink where I left it. But when I head back out, the whole transaction taking less than a minute, I catch sight of the screens on the wall, and I slam to a halt. I'm staring at the square screen that peers right into Mickey Kline's office downstairs, and for a long stretch of time, I'm not positive what it is I'm seeing.

And then my brain arranges the scene, puts all the colors and lines and shapes in the right order, and I realize what I'm seeing is Mickey, with a woman in his lap. A woman that isn't Stella. This woman has dark, almost black hair covering most of her face, but not enough of it to obscure the fact that they're kissing, and based on the way she's grinding on his lap, I'm not so sure how long it'll be before they're doing more than that.

I feel a sickness start in my stomach, like being on a gently rocking boat. *Stella*. How long has Kline been doing this? How many women has he brought into his lair while Stella was away from home?

In the bank of screens, I see myself, standing in the middle of the living room, frozen for far too long. The woman crawls off Mickey's lap, and I don't want to see what happens next.

I throw open the door and rush down the hallway toward the elevators. It's a short walk, as Mickey's condo is the only one up here. As soon I get inside, I bend over at the waist, my hands on my knees.

“Fuck!” I shout into the empty elevator. I press my forehead to the cold steel of the elevator doors and think about Stella, her kind eyes and bright smile. She deserves so much better than this.

But it’s not my place to say anything. It wasn’t my place to witness that at all. I wasn’t even supposed to be in there. And now there are a million reasons why I can’t say anything, why I *shouldn’t* say anything, but one really big reason why I should.

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CHAPTER 11

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ADAM

I make it a week. That's how long the ugly thing I saw sits in my chest, trying to claw its way out. I make sure to keep my head down. I know if I look at Stella, if I meet her gaze even once, it'll come spilling out of me like a dam ripped open by a rainstorm. So, I don't look. She says hello to me and Shawn and the other guys as she comes and goes, but it's nothing more than that.

Until a week after the incident with Mickey. That morning, the guys and I arrive at the condo to a fight so loud that we can all hear it as we wait in the hallway for someone to open the door. I'm back behind the other guys, further from the door, so I can't make out a lot, but when the shouting switches from Stella's slight voice to Mickey's booming one, I can hear every word.

"I am aware that you are a human being with needs. I thought I was meeting those needs! I thought I was giving you everything you wanted, but now you're telling me it's not enough? You need my attention all the time, like a child?"

It takes everything in me not to press my ear to the wall. This isn't our business and I know that, but there's a part of me, the part responsible for my trembling hands, that wants to be in there defending her. Does he not see the way he ignores her? The way she walks through his home like a phantom while he works and entertains and fucks other women?

The doorbell rings through again, and I grit my teeth and scowl at my boss as the voices on the other side of the wall fall quiet. I hear footsteps and then the door flies open. The guys

file into the condo, but I'm still standing there in the hallway, my hands balled into fists. When I can finally bring myself to move, I stomp past Mickey, still holding the door open. We don't know each other. We've barely spoken in the time that I've been working on his condo, but in this moment, I know I hate him.

As soon as the door shuts behind me, Mickey takes off down the hallway, but I search for *her*. I may not have heard what she said, but I heard the tone of her voice, the desperate pitch of it, and I need to know she's okay. I can't even explain why. None of this is my business.

My eyes find her on the balcony. She's out there with her back to the condo, her elbows on the railing, and her face in her hands. I don't have to be able to hear her to know she's crying. I can tell by the trembling of her muscles and the shake of her shoulders. And I'm moving before I can stop myself.

"Adam," I hear Shawn hiss, but I can't stop. My body is being pushed forward by some magnetic force. I slide open the door, and when Stella's head comes up, I know she thinks I'm Mickey, but then her wet eyes focus on me, and she quickly reaches up to wipe at her face.

"Adam." She breathes out my name, and I suppress a shiver at the sound of it on her lips. I'm distracted for a second by the way it comes out so easily, like she's said it a hundred times.

"You okay?"

She coughs out a laugh. "Of course I am. I'm sorry if you heard any of—"

"You're crying," I say as if she's unaware.

She turns her back to me, her red hair blowing in the wind. "It was just a stupid fight."

I know where the line is. I am not Stella's friend. I'm not in a position to talk to her about her relationship, but my feet can't stay on this side of the line anymore, not after what I saw a week ago. "He was yelling pretty loud for a stupid fight."

She turns to me, and I register the shock on her face before she manages to mask it. She knows where the line is, too. She shakes her head, trying to seem casual when I can see the worry lines around her mouth. “That’s just Mickey.”

“And you’re fine with that?”

Her eyebrows furrow, her mouth pinching, and I know she’s looking to redirect her anger. Maybe she didn’t get to say what she needed to, so now she’s here, taking a step toward me, trying to find someone else to throw her words at. I’m not budging. I’ll take her anger if Mickey won’t.

“This really isn’t any of your business,” she says, jaw tight. And God, I know she’s right. Whatever I’m doing here, it’s not me. It feels like an out-of-body experience, like I’m still in that hallway and some other dream-walking version of me is out here on this balcony with her. So, why can’t I stop?

“He looks right through you and then yells at you for needing his attention. What kind of man does that?”

Her mouth pops open, the bow shape of it emphasized against the pink of her tongue, the one that peeks out to wet her bottom lip. I’m frozen, watching it disappear again. “Who even are you? You don’t know anything about Mickey.”

I grimace. I know he refuses his long-term girlfriend affection and then lets some random woman dry hump him in his office. “I know enough.”

She’s right in front of me, so much shorter than me that she has to tilt her head back just to jut her chin out in a way that she thinks is intimidating, but all it does is make me want to grab on to her, plunge my hands into her hair, and bend down to kiss her.

“Mickey is a good man.”

I take a step toward her, feeling this secret I’ve been holding take its toll on me, like an egg under the heel of a boot, cracking slowly. “If you think he’s such a great guy, maybe you don’t know him as well as you think you do.”

Her eyes go wide and her cheeks go pink, her face so close to mine that I can see every sliver of color in her irises, every

freckle along her cheeks that she's tried to cover with her makeup. When her breath puffs out on my face, it's on a tremble.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

I don't know what to say next, but does it even matter? I've said too much to take it back now. We stand there in silence for too long, neither of us backing down. She's not walking away until I give her an answer.

“Watch the security tapes from last Tuesday.”

She stumbles back a step, like I pushed her. “What the hell are you talking about?”

I can't take the way she's looking at me, the gentle tremor of her chin. I've buried a fear in her that I can't take back, don't know if I should even want to take back. Because what's worse: putting that look of fear in her eye or letting her go on with that bastard, completely oblivious?

I put my hands up, more because I'm trying to keep myself from touching her than anything else. “Watch it or don't watch it. I've got to get to work.”

It kills me to leave her out there. I don't even know why I did this. I don't know what I was hoping to gain. But now, whatever damage Mickey did, whatever I thought I could make better when I went out there, I've only made it worse. I feel like a zombie as I move into the kitchen, where all the guys are watching me. Shawn looks sick to his stomach, and my boss is glaring at me with a vein in his head pulsing out a heavy rhythm.

The balcony door opens, and everyone's eyes go over my shoulder, but I don't turn to look. I hear Stella come into the condo, hear the shuffle of her feet as she moves through the living room and down the hallway. Her bedroom door slams.

“Lake,” my boss growls. “Outside. Now.” He stomps to the front door and wrenches it open, and I follow behind with my jaw clenched tight because I know how this is going to end and there's nothing I can do about it. As soon as the door closes behind us, he's twisting to face me, the skin under his

thick mustache red and his hands on his hips, curled into meaty fists. “Pack your shit and go home.”

I know it’s useless, but I open my mouth anyway. “Sir—”

“No.” He puts up a hand to stop me. “I don’t know what the fuck makes you think you have any business butting into the lives of our clients, but if you just cost me this job, I’ll do more than fire you. Get off my job site. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

I do what he says, feeling a slow rage boiling under my skin—at my boss, at Mickey, at myself. Because he’s right. This is none of my business. Who am I to step in and try to break up a relationship? And is that what I was doing? Trying to break up their relationship? For all I know, Mickey Kline does this all the time. For all I know, Stella is perfectly fine with it.

But I think about the way she stepped away from me when I told her to check the tapes. She didn’t know. I’m sure of it.

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CHAPTER 12

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STELLA

My hands shake as I attempt to navigate the security recordings. The menu lets me scroll through the dates for the last thirty days, and I click on last Tuesday, but I have no idea what I'm looking for as I skip forward through the dark hours between midnight and when Mickey rolled out of bed. I watch the day go by in double time. I only need to pay attention to the hours that Adam would have been in the condo. On the screen, the contractors arrive minutes after I leave early in the morning to spend the day with Abby. I scan as many of the cameras as I can at a time, watching the contractors work, watching Mickey work. Then the contractors leave, and all that's left is Mickey, alone in his office.

I slump back on the bed, feeling relief spread through me like a warm drink on a cold day. I don't know what Adam was talking about, but whatever it is, he was wrong. Nothing happened last Tuesday. His past self has already walked out of the condo and gone home.

But then, after several minutes tick by, a woman appears on the screen that shows the hallway in front of the door. She's dressed like she's ready for a cocktail party, in a slinky strapless dress, and she doesn't even knock. She comes into *my* home like she belongs there. Downstairs, I can see Mickey still working on his computer until the woman makes her way down to his office to join him. She knows exactly where the stairs are, where his office is. She's been here before.

Mickey pulls his attention away from his computer to watch her come into the room, the way he never does with me.

I can see their mouths moving as she heads in his direction, but I don't turn up the volume. There are still contractors in the hallway right now, and the last thing I need is for them to hear anything humiliating. I feel like a teenager watching dirty movies with their parents in the next room. The woman perches on the edge of Mickey's desk while they talk, and then she reaches out and runs a hand through Mickey's hair, and instead of pulling away, Mickey leans into it, his mouth pressed to her wrist, and I feel bile rise up in my throat.

Something catches my eye as my finger moves to turn the whole thing off. Adam. He appears at the front door, knocking and waiting and then knocking again before he lets himself into the condo. He rushes through, going straight to the bathroom and grabbing something before heading back to the living room. And then he stops dead, looking at the security footage playing out on the TV. He marches out of the condo. Just like that, the moment over. I go back and watch the whole thing again as Adam watches with me, like he's sitting right next to me on the bed, whispering in my ear, *maybe you don't know him as well as you think you do*. I watch Mickey smile at the woman as the tears start. I watch her kiss him and watch him not fight her. I watch her climb onto his lap, and I shut off the screens.

It takes me forty-five minutes to pack my things. At least, the things that will fit in my suitcase and duffel bag. The rest doesn't matter. Most of what I have Mickey bought me, stuff I won't need for a life without him, the fancy clothes I needed for social outings and the expensive jewelry that came on every birthday and holiday.

When I find Mickey in his office, I can't stop thinking about the way that woman, a complete stranger, pressed her hip to the edge of his desk, the way her body language said she owned the place, and maybe she does now. I certainly don't.

"Just a minute," Mickey calls to me from the other side of the room when I come in. He's bent under a tall machine that I couldn't identify the use of if I had a gun pressed to my head. After some clanging, he emerges, and when he sees my face, wet with tears, his shoulders slump.

“Baby,” he says. “I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry.”

He thinks I’m still upset about our fight, when he said that sometimes I’m too clingy for him, that I need too much. Yes, that hurt. But not nearly as much as what came after.

“Who is she?” I whisper, and it only takes a second for his face to change, for my words to register in his genius’s brain. And just like that, I end everything.

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CHAPTER 13

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STELLA

I was never able to take advantage of Mickey's wealth the way he wanted me to. I would buy clothes at a department store, and he would insist I could buy designer. I never developed a taste for fancy wine or all-day spa getaways. The money wasn't mine, and the thought of so carelessly spending someone else's money made my skin crawl.

But now, lying on my musty mattress, staring up at the water spot on my ceiling that seems to have gotten much bigger since yesterday, I miss it all. I miss the way it felt like money could accomplish anything. It's quite obvious now that my bank account cannot accomplish much.

And even though he admitted to getting involved with that woman, I miss Mickey, too. I miss waking up next to someone. I miss brushing our teeth at our separate sinks. And I miss the sex. I know now that even if it wasn't everything I wanted it to be, at least it was something.

But it wasn't Mickey I dreamed about last night. It was Adam. A dream where that soft-looking pink mouth made its way south, all the way to the spot between my legs. He licked and licked and then the rumbling of my neighbor's garage woke me up. There's still the ghost of a throb there, in that spot where I swear I can still feel his tongue, and I think about slipping a hand into my underwear but that feels so wrong, getting off while thinking about someone you barely know, who may or may not be the reason your relationship just ended.

I throw my covers off and go to the kitchen to make myself coffee in my fifteen-dollar coffee pot instead of Mickey's fancy espresso machine. My coffee maker poops out after half my carafe is full, and the coffee tastes like sludge.

I have two interviews today, which is a good thing because all that's left from my grocery run last week is a box of Pop-Tarts and half a loaf of bread. I stick a pack of Pop-Tarts in the toaster and stare at the credit card on my counter. It has my name on it, but it's Mickey's. He insisted I keep it when I left.

"For emergencies," he said last week when I moved out, but I haven't used it. When I left, I had enough in my bank account for food and coffee, enough for a refresh on all of my toiletries. But that was about it. I tap my fingers along the bottom edge of the card, and before my Pop-Tarts have resurfaced, I've cut the card into pieces. It sits on my counter like a dismembered body, and I stare at it the whole time I eat my breakfast before sweeping it into the trash.

I rinse my plate and turn off the water, but my sink makes a strange sound in the complete silence of my home. It's hissing, like the sound of carbonation when you open a can of soda. I open the cabinet under the sink and see a small spray of water coming from a rubber hose, right where it connects to a pipe. I know nothing about sinks, but I bend down to look anyway. I reach out to twist the bolt connecting the two pieces, hoping I can tighten it, but the second my fingers touch the metal, the hose snaps and starts spewing water out onto the floor.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!"

I grab onto the hose like it's a snake that's trying to bite me, but that just gets the front of me soaked, and not knowing any other option, I reach for my phone and pray my brother will answer for once.

"Hello?" His familiar voice is like salve on a wound, and I would be relieved if it weren't for the water glugging its way around my kitchen tile.

"Max! My sink is spewing, and I don't know how to stop it!"

There's a beat of silence. The water gugs.

"Your kitchen sink or your bathroom sink?" he asks, far too calm for my taste.

"Does it matter?" I screech.

"Guess not. There should be a knob somewhere. It's a shut-off valve. See it?"

I glance under the sink, trying to ignore the water cascading down onto my socks. They're already soggy. Up under the sink, there's a little silver knob, oblong in shape. I twist it hard, and the water stops. "Okay, I got it," I tell Max. "What do I do now?"

There's some shuffling, and Max pulls the phone away from his mouth to say something to someone that's with him. Then his voice is loud in my ear again. "I don't know. Have Kline fix it. Isn't he a super genius?"

"I'm back on Light Street." Before Mickey, Max and I were sharing the condo, living off of discount meat and bags of rice and pasta. Every day was an endless parade of ridiculous jobs and absolutely nothing of interest. And then Mickey came along and shook everything up with his charming compliments and easy smile, his kindness toward complete strangers, his absolute ingenuity in bed. Max started traveling for work, and that's been our life ever since. Now I'm back, but Max isn't.

He's quiet again as my words sink in. "Shit, Stella. I'm sorry. What happened?"

"He cheated."

"That bastard," he growls. "Want me to come over there and cut his balls off?"

It's strange to be having this conversation while I'm standing in a river of water in my kitchen. "You know," I say, kicking the broken hose aside. "I was really okay with it until my kitchen flooded. Mickey would know exactly what to do."

"You're gonna have to call a plumber, little sis."

I feel a lump form in my throat, and I cough it away. What a stupid thing to be so upset about. It's just a broken hose. Do I even need my kitchen sink that badly?

"I don't have any money, Max." It's hard for me to admit it, but I've never been very good at hiding things from Max. He's my other half. Part of it is the twin bond, but part of it is the sort of bond that's formed when you're ten years old, sitting next to each other in an empty funeral home, the only other family you have in caskets. The sort of bond that's formed when you get put in a group home where you sleep with your backs to each other like soldiers. The sort of bond that links you in a way that makes every social worker say, "If you want one, you have to take them both," because we would have rather died than be separated.

"I'll send you some."

"No!" I take a deep breath. "I'll figure it out. I don't want you to pay for it. You're already paying for the place itself. The least I can do is pay the bills and upkeep."

His voice is gentle when he speaks again. "Hey, it's half my place, too. Let me take care of you, Stella."

I grit my teeth. "I don't need you to take care of me. I just need to get back to work. I had two interviews scheduled today, but now I have a flooded kitchen, so I don't think those are happening."

"You'll call me if I can help?"

"Yeah. Say hi to the grizzly bears for me."

He chuckles, the sound so comforting in my ear. The number of times Max has laughed directly into my ear when we were trying to be quiet or secretive seems almost infinite. "They don't have grizzlies in Argentina."

"I thought you were in Alaska."

"Not since Tuesday."

"I can't keep up."

"I don't expect you to. Worry about yourself, little sister. I love you."

“Love you, too.”

As soon as we hang up, the full weight of the situation settles on me. I have to pay someone to fix this. How long can I go without taking care of it? It’s not like I don’t have another sink in the bathroom.

I put towels on the floor and slosh around on them, considering my options. I could call Mickey. He would come here and fix this in a heartbeat. I could tuck the broken hose into the cabinet and just not use the sink until I have enough money to get it taken care of. I could watch a bunch of YouTube videos and try to fix it myself.

None of which seem like great options.

I look at my phone.

There *is* one more option. But I’m not sure it’s the best one.

Before I can give myself too long to think about it, I grab my phone and Google the repair service working on Mickey’s house. I remember the name of it from the shirts everyone wore, with the logo sprawled across all of those muscular chests. One muscular chest in particular, at eye level and distractingly flexed while he worked. Adam.

I shake my head, not realizing my hands are trembling until it takes a few tries to hit the call button. I can’t possibly be this nervous for a phone call, but I have to focus on breathing steadily as I put the phone to my ear.

“Cylburn Repair. This is Cindy. How can I help you today?”

“Hi, my name is Stella Hart. I was wondering if you could put me in contact with Adam Lake. He’s one of your employees.”

There’s some clacking of nails on keys while I wait. “I’m sorry, Ms. Hart, but I don’t have an Adam Lake in my directory. Is it something I can help you with?”

“Um. Not really. I’m certain Adam Lake works for you.” I can feel embarrassment moving up to color my cheeks. Did I

get the name of the repair service wrong? I doubt that. I noticed it every single day. Their shirts were bright red, and every time I saw them, it was always a bit jarring, like being hit in the face with a tomato.

“I apologize, Ms. Hart.”

She sounds like she’s about to hang up, and my pulse jumps. “What about Shawn Meyers? Do you have a Shawn Meyers in your system?”

More clacking. “Oh! Yes, I have a Shawn Meyers. Wait one second, and I’ll have him contact you.”

The line goes dead, and I stare at my phone, waiting. It’s less than a minute before a call comes through from an unknown number.

“Shawn?”

“Stell—uh, Ms. Hart? Is something wrong?”

“Where’s Adam?”

There’s banging in the background, and I’m made very aware that Shawn is currently working at Mickey’s place. It’s only been a week since I moved out. He and Adam would be done with the bathroom, probably moving on to the kitchen with everyone else.

I hear Shawn move away from the noise, until eventually it all fades away. I wonder which room he stepped into. “Adam got fired.”

His words hit me quick, like being struck by lightning. “What? Why?”

“Because of whatever he said to you on your balcony last week.”

I press a hand to my face. I knew, just like Adam must have that day, that he was breaking the rules and vaulting over appropriate boundaries, but it certainly wasn’t reason for him to lose his job. Guilt roils in my stomach, but whose fault is it really, mine or Adam’s? “He didn’t deserve that. I could talk to your boss—”

“Between the two of us, Ms. Hart, I don’t think he’s looking to come back.”

“Oh.” Was Adam as unhappy in his life as I was in mine? Maybe he set us both free. “Well, to be honest, I was calling because—” I bury my face in my hands. God, this sounds awful. “I was calling because I thought he might be convinced to do a job for me, pro bono. I have a big leak and no money.”

“Where’s the leak?”

I look down at my soaked towels, my wet clothes, the tube hanging out of my cabinet. “Well, I touched a tube under my sink and it exploded and flooded my kitchen. I got the water shut off, but...” I trail off, and he doesn’t wait for me to finish.

“Sounds like your supply line broke. Look, don’t worry about anything. I got you taken care of.”

And just like that, he’s gone. Doesn’t anyone say goodbye in this industry?

I’m gathering the soaked towels from my floor when my cell rings again. I rush to toss the towels in the bathtub and rub my wet hands on any dry stretch of clothing I can find before answering.

“Hello?”

“Stella?”

It’s unsettling, the way the world seems to go still. How can the voice of a complete stranger be so comforting? “Adam?”

There’s a beat of silence, where the only thing crossing over the line is our mutual breathing, and then he says, “Shawn says you could use some help.”

CHAPTER 14

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ADAM

If you'd asked me when I woke up this morning how I was going to spend the day, I would have said, *Netflix and scraping paint off my front door*. I would *not* have said, *fixing a supply line for Stella Hart*.

When Shawn called earlier, his exact words were, "Remember that girl whose life you took a shit on? She needs a new supply line, so you better get your ass in gear."

And thank God because I haven't stopped thinking about Stella even once for the last week. While I bought paint, I thought about her; while I re-finished my parents' old dining room table, I thought about her; while I pressure-washed the cobblestone path in front of my house, I thought about her. And I've thought about her every time I've wrapped my hand around my dick.

Standing in front of her door, I try to quell the guilt rising in my chest at the sight of her building. It's not a terrible neighborhood, but it's far from the multi-million-dollar home she was sharing with Kline. Her welcome mat is singed from what looks like cigarette ashes, and from the ash tray sitting on her neighbor's patio, full to the brim, I can guess who ruined the mat. All that's left of the number on her door is an outline that's been sunburned into the paint.

When I knock, the world is so quiet that I hear her feet slapping on the floor as she travels through her condo. "For the record, when I said *pro bono*, I meant that I can't pay you *today*. But I fully intend to pay you as soon as I have enough money," she says by way of greeting.

She looks completely different than she did a week ago. Her hair hangs loose on her shoulders in disarray, and her face is clean and bare of makeup. She's wearing jeans and a black t-shirt instead of one of her sexy sundresses. She's still insanely beautiful, just in a different way.

I hold up the replacement part I brought for her sink. "Least I can do for ending your relationship." I'm not sure when the words come out of my mouth if they're the right thing to say, if the joke will land or if she'll be upset that I mentioned Kline at all, but to my relief, she smiles.

She moves aside, and I step into her condo, the entirety of which could fit into the entryway of Mickey's place. To the left, the living room is just big enough for her couch and coffee table and TV, sitting on top of a black trunk. To the right, her kitchen offers enough space for one person at a time, the doors of the cabinet under her sink thrown open.

I go straight for it, trying not to get distracted by the little bits and pieces of Stella everywhere: her shoes by the front door, all lined up, a mug on the kitchen counter with a smear of pink lipstick on the rim, a bra thrown over the back of a reading chair over by the window that she's probably unaware is there. I don't need all of these details fueling my fantasies. She's already been enough of a siren to me. It's hard enough to remember that every *physical* thing that's ever happened between Stella and me has happened in my imagination, sometimes several times in one day, without all of this mucking up my brain even more.

The tile in the kitchen is wet, so I crouch down and start working on her sink's ruined entrails. I work in silence for a little bit, and then she says, from where she's leaning one hip against the kitchen counter, "I'm sorry you got fired. You didn't deserve that."

I'm glad I won't be expected to make eye contact with her, all of my focus on what I'm doing under the sink. "Sure, I did. I crossed a big line." More than one, but again, things going on inside my brain don't count if she doesn't know about them.

"Well, I'm glad you told me. About Mickey, I mean."

I should leave it alone. I should fix her sink and move on with my life and never speak to her again. But I can't. Why can't I leave this woman alone? "Why would you be glad?"

When she's quiet for a long time, I lean my head out of the cabinet and glance at her. She has her head bowed, picking at her cuticles. Her eyes flicker to mine, and I go back to the sink.

"Mickey and I weren't right for each other," she finally says. "But I needed a reason to leave. You did me a favor."

I fumble the supple line tube and have to grip it again.

If she notices that my hands are trembling, she doesn't mention it. "Shawn said he thought you might not have minded losing your job all that much. Is that true?"

I fasten everything down as tight as I can and straighten up to face her, and that's when I see that her hands are trembling, too. I have no idea what's going on in her head, why she's nervous, but it's nice to know it's not just me, even if the knowledge that she's nervous makes my blood run hot. Is it because we're standing so close? Is it because we're alone? Is it because there was no guarantee we would ever see each other again, and now we're here, mere feet from each other?

I clear my throat, pulling my thoughts away from her perfect fingers. "I've been wanting to work for myself for as long as I can remember, but I really needed a push." I think about what she said about Mickey. She needed a reason. I guess I did, too.

"A handyman business?"

"Home repair. A little more involved than handyman. Bigger stuff."

I feel strange with my wrench hanging at my side. I motion toward the sink with it, like a strange extension of my limb. My body has stopped making sense to me since I realized she's as nervous as me. "Sorry about the flood, but that thing really needed to be replaced."

She sighs, a heavy thing that drags her shoulders down. "Everything needs to be replaced, but it would appear that sort

of thing costs money.”

I glance around her kitchen. The tile is dingy and grey, the countertops outdated by a couple of decades, a few of the drawers hanging lopsided and partially off their tracks. It needs some real work. The idea comes to me as I’m staring down at her sink, so old it doesn’t even have a garbage disposal. My head comes up, and my nerves about being in her home vanish like a wisp of smoke.

“Hey, do you own this place?”

She has a momentary look on her face, like maybe the answer isn’t a simple *yes* or *no*, but she nods anyway.

“Would you be open to a full-body reno? Floors, paint, fixtures, the whole nine?”

“What, are you about to suggest I audition for some sort of home makeover show?” I’m not sure what it is, but something about her wry humor, the sarcastic sincerity in her eyes, makes me like her even more.

“No, I was thinking I could do it.”

Her face shifts then, her eyes widening and her skin going pale. “Look, I’m not going to sleep with you just so—”

“No!” I put my hands up, the one holding the wrench swaying ominously. Her eyes shoot to it, and I set it on the counter quickly. “Nothing like that.”

Her jaw tightens under her skin, drawing my eye. “I’m not an idiot. People don’t do anything for free. What do you want?”

My eyes scan the rest of the condo, the faded paint on the walls, the cracked molding, the worn fixtures. “I need a project. Something I can work on for before and after photos. I need some things to advertise, to show to prospective clients. I’m doing some work on my place, and some here and there stuff for a buddy of mine, but I need a big job. I need a place that needs a lot of work, like this.”

She seems to be considering it. Her eyes follow the same path mine did, from the floor to the counters to the ceiling. She

takes a deep breath and looks at the supply line I fixed. I reach down and turn the shut-off valve until I hear water sputter through the line. Her eyes finally meet mine, and I set both hands on the counter.

“Maybe just think on it. I’d be here day and night for at least a month, maybe longer, but the quicker it gets done, the better. I’ll have to send someone in for pictures, maybe even walk a few clients through at the beginning. And of course, I’ll expect you to leave me glowing reviews.” I smile as invitingly as I can, and her eyes seem to get stuck on my mouth. I can’t hold my smile in place after that.

“But I would have a completely updated home.”

When her eyes meet mine, they’re full of hunger, and even though I know it’s hunger for a nicer home, maybe hunger for a small piece of what she lost, the heat in her eyes makes something fizzle under my skin. I want her to look at me with that kind of hunger in her eyes and know that it’s for me. An urgency settles in me. I want her to say *yes*.

We stand there for a moment, quiet but for the sound of one of Stella’s neighbors coughing harshly through the wall. I pick up my wrench and the few other tools I brought in case the job was bigger than just the hose. “Let me know what you decide. You know where to find me.”

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CHAPTER 15

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STELLA

“I don’t see what the problem is,” Abby says in my ear.

“Of course you don’t.” I maneuver onto Brown and scan the sidewalk for a place to park. Are office jobs downtown really worth it if you have to hunt and scavenge for parking every day? Maybe there’s a parking garage somewhere nearby. “I would have a complete stranger in my home every single day, and when it’s all over, I would feel indebted to him. I can guarantee you he’s doing this whole thing out of pity because he essentially broke Mickey and me up.”

I try to parallel park in front of the building where my interview is supposed to start in fifteen minutes, but then I realize it’s a handicap space and pull back onto the street to a litany of angry honking.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be talking and driving at the same time. But anyway, you wouldn’t be indebted to him. It was his idea, and you’re doing him a favor.”

“This favor feels extremely lopsided.”

I finally find a free space and pull into it, taking a deep breath. I can hear Abby crunching on the other end of the line. She’s on her lunch break, I guess. “Okay, so maybe he also wants to clean your pipes, if you know what I mean. Would that be so bad? From what you tell me, it wouldn’t be much of a sacrifice on your end.”

I glare out the windshield until she says, “Okay. Sorry. Kidding.”

“I have to get inside.”

“Good luck! And call that hottie and tell him yes!” She disconnects the call, and I sigh.

I fix my skirt and rush into the building, now only minutes from the start of my interview. Reception jobs in downtown Baltimore can be hard to find when you’re the least qualified on the roster. These positions almost never want someone like me, but I applied for this seasonal position last week, and here I am with an interview.

“Ms. Hart?” A woman hovering in the hallway asks as soon as I’ve stepped out of the elevator, and I see, like I always do, my identity register on her face. *Mickey Kline’s girlfriend*. That’s all I’ll ever be.

“Ms. Richards?” I ask with my smile plastered on and my hand out, ready to deliver my most professional handshake.

She shakes my hand and leads me into a meeting room with a conference table that stretches from one end of the room to the other and a large watercolor of a pack of horses on the wall. “Have a seat, please.”

I make sure to tuck my feet under the table when I sit down so she can’t see that my heels are scuffed.

“Okay, Ms. Hart. Tell me a little about yourself.”

I hate this question. *Tell me about yourself* feels like what you ask someone who has war stories. Someone who’s interesting. Someone like Mickey.

“Well, I lived in Detroit until I was eighteen and then I moved here, to Baltimore. I got my GED when I was seventeen, and then I went straight into the workforce. I’ve had every job in the book: waitressing, telemarketing, cashiering, food delivery, house cleaning—”

“And then you became famous.”

My teeth smack together. “Oh.” I laugh nervously, even though it doesn’t feel like a joke. She’s smiling like it was one. “Yes, I guess so. Unintentionally.”

Ms. Richards waves a hand, a casual brush-off. “I’ve been following Mickey Kline’s career for years. It’s so cool that you’re dating him.”

Just when my nerves have started to settle, they rocket back up. “Not that it matters, but we’re not together anymore.” Haven’t been for a whole week. It’s still strange to even think about. But I don’t want to talk about that. Not here in an interview. I smile my biggest smile. “But as I was saying, I have a lot of varied work experience to bring to the table.”

Ms. Richards nods, clearly taking the hint, and looks down at my resume. I watch her scan the page. She flips the page over, like she might have missed something, and then looks up at me slowly. “So, when you say you got your GED, was that your most recent schooling?”

I feel heat travel up to my cheeks, not because I’m ashamed that my GED is as far as I ever made it in my education, but because I can already tell that her question is leading somewhere I’m not going to like. I already feel the train going off the tracks, but I try to stop it anyway.

“Yes, but I have enough experience answering phones and organizing schedules that I thought...” My voice trails off when I see the way her mouth twists, the tight grimace on her face.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Hart, but this is an executive assistant position. I need someone with a degree and a minimum of two years of experience on an executive level.”

The flush on my face travels down until I can feel the heat of it spread across my chest. This blush is purely from anger. “I don’t understand. Why was I called for an interview if you feel I’m not qualified? You got my resume when I applied.”

Her mouth does that twisting thing again, and she glances over my shoulder with fire in her eyes. I twist my neck to look, and the three girls who are peering in through the window in the door don’t move fast enough. I see their smiles and then their shocked expressions before they duck out of view.

Ms. Richards doesn't have to answer. I already know. I got a call because someone who works here saw my name and thought it would be fun to have Mickey Kline's girlfriend in the building.

I scoop up my purse, even as Ms. Richards is trying to apologize. "Have a great day," I tell her before walking out.

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CHAPTER 16

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ADAM

I wake up in a sweat, hard as a fucking rock. I lie there in the dark and replay my dream over and over again. Stella Hart, her mouth sliding up and down my cock. I slip my hand under the covers.

Jerking off to dirty dreams about Stella has become my morning routine. I try time and again to forget the look of her stretched out in Mickey's bed, all curves and creamy skin, but my dick refuses to let the image go. It pretends that Stella was there for me, waiting for me to come up to that door so that she could go up on her elbows, open her mouth, and take me deep.

My balls pull up tight, and I hiss, torn between playing out the whole fantasy and getting it over with quick so I won't feel so guilty about it later. I stroke myself slow and imagine her, letting me put my hands in her long hair, letting me guide her deeper, until she has to come off me with a gasp. Her lips all wet and pink.

I come, spilling onto my stomach with a sigh. This is getting a little ridiculous. Maybe I should just go to a bar or something, find a woman who won't mind helping me blow off some steam.

But as I lie there, I know it won't be enough. I could have an orgy with a whole troupe of women, and it wouldn't be enough because it's not Stella. She's the only one I want, which is pretty inconvenient because I'm fairly certain I'm never going to see her again. It's been a week since I made my offer, and I haven't heard a peep. She's probably horrified that

I made the offer at all. I mean, yeah, it gets her an updated condo, but she has to have a complete stranger in her home at all times. I could be a serial killer for all she knows.

I roll out of bed and take a quick shower before making myself some toast for breakfast. I don't have a ton of time before I have to head over to Ford's place to retille his bathroom. I'm charging half what I would charge anyone else, but a job is a job.

On the counter, my phone rings. I answer it without looking, putting it on speakerphone so I don't have to stop buttering my toast. "Hey, Ford, I'll be there in ten minutes. I got a little bit of a late start."

"Who's Ford?"

My gaze shoots to my screen, where Stella's name is lit up in bold letters. Shit. I drop my knife with a clatter and scramble for my phone, taking it off speaker and pressing it to my ear. "Stella. Hey. Sorry, I thought you were a friend of mine." My heart is racing, and I feel like she'll be able to hear it in my voice.

I'm not sure what I'm expecting. Maybe a polite brush-off or even a comment about how she's still considering it, when it's really obvious that she's going to say no. But instead, she says, "I want to do this."

My irrational brain, and maybe my dick a little, completely misunderstands her. Coming off that fantasy of her that I just jerked off to, my brain hears, "I want to do this. I want to come to your house and fuck you." I'm fairly certain that's not what she meant.

I'm quiet too long, and she says, "Does your offer still stand?"

"Yes," I spit out quick. "Yes, it still stands. I have a job I'm starting today, but I can be there Monday."

"Yeah, okay." There's something in her voice, something tentative, and I want to ask her about it, but she doesn't need me in her business. "I'll see you Monday."

She's about to hang up, but I have something to say. Something I should have said a long time ago. "Stella, hey."

"Yeah?"

I stare down at my toast, going cold. I could just let this rest. I could pretend it never happened, and we could both move on. But that's not the kind of guy I am. Grabbing onto my knife, I push it into the tub of butter, watching it sink in smooth.

"I owe you an apology."

Over the line, she sighs. "Adam, if this is about Mickey—"

"It's not." I let go of the knife and pace into my living room. "It's about that first day. When I—" The words get caught in my throat, and I clear it with a small cough. "I didn't mean to look into your bedroom that day. I certainly didn't think—"

"Oh, my God," she says, loud enough to cut me off. "Adam, we don't have to talk about that. You don't have to apologize. I know you weren't, like, being a creep or anything. You can just—"

"No," I say over her. "I want you to feel safe with me. I'm about to spend a lot of time in your house, and I don't want you to have any reason to think I would do anything to make you uncomfortable. I swear I will be as professional as I possibly can be."

"I know," she says, this time in a whisper so quiet that I almost keep talking right over her. "It's okay, Adam. It's fine. We'll be professional. No worries." She has that strange tone to her voice again, like she's forcing herself to speak. "I'll see you on Monday, Adam."

For a long time after she hangs up, I stand in the middle of my living room, feeling like someone who's just been knocked off balance.

CHAPTER 17

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ADAM

The first time I show up at Stella's place to work, she's not alone.

"I'd like to apologize in advance," she says when she lets me in.

On Stella's couch is a woman about Stella's age with long, dark hair and the brightest red lips I've ever seen. "Hello!" she says. "I'm Abby. You must be the hunk."

Stella glowers at her. "Nobody calls you that," she says in my direction, and then her eyes pop wide. "Not that you're not..." She waves vaguely at me, and I clench my jaw to hold in a smile as Stella's entire face turns the most gorgeous shade of pink.

"I'm Adam," I say in Abby's general direction, but I've already stepped into the kitchen. "We can move your microwave to the living room so you can eat," I tell Stella, opening drawers and cabinets to examine their holds. Maybe I'm moving a little too quickly, but if I let myself be scrutinized right now, it's going to become very clear very quickly how excited I am to be in Stella's home, and I need to dial it back if I want to be completely professional, like I swore I would be.

"Where will you start?" Stella has followed me into the kitchen, Abby watching us from the living room. I can smell a protective best friend from a mile away, and I feel relief uncoiling in my chest. Stella still has someone looking out for her. And if Abby is here, I won't be tempted to do anything

stupid, like tell Stella that I haven't stopped thinking about her for a single second in the three weeks since we met.

"I'll pull the cabinets and the countertops. I can do the cabinets alone, but I'll have to bring someone in to help with the countertops."

Stella makes a clicking noise with her tongue. "I can help."

I turn to her and reach for one of her wrists, pulling her arm away from where it's crossed at her chest, the contact making my skin buzz like a beehive. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Abby shift on the couch. I hold up Stella's puny arm. There's a little bit of muscle definition there, but I'm guessing she's probably spent more time focusing on keeping her stomach flat than her muscles strong.

Stella jerks her hand from my grasp with a scowl. I get a shot of thrill in my stomach when her eyes go to my biceps, and she swallows audibly. Abby is now leaning against the counter that separates the kitchen from the living room, watching me like a hawk.

Stella steps back. "I boxed up everything in the drawers and cabinets. Just keep me updated when you're moving rooms." She takes another ginger step back. "We'll try to stay out of your way."

"You're not—" I start, ready to tell her that there's no way she could be in my way. In fact, I *want* her to be in my way. I want her to brush up against me when she comes to the kitchen for something. I want her to bump into me when I'm walking through the living room. I want her to distract me when she walks through the condo in her pajamas. But then I catch sight of Abby, and I bite back my words.

Keep it professional.

"I'll just get to work."

I'm aware of Stella and Abby the whole time. They talk about a job interview that Stella has tomorrow and Stella's brother, who apparently once shared the condo with her and is now traveling the world, being some kind of famous photographer. But they spend very little time talking about

Stella before they move to Abby. She complains about her job and gives Stella a very detailed debrief on a date she went on two days ago where the guy insisted on going down on her but refused return service.

During this conversation, my eye catches Stella's. I see the pink of her cheeks, crawling all the way down to where her skin disappears behind the collar of her shirt, and almost drop the cabinet I'm hauling out to my truck. I rush out and take a deep breath of fresh air before going back in.

When I get back inside, Stella is leaning against her sink, her arms crossed and her head bowed. I hear the toilet flush in the bathroom.

"I'm sorry about her," Stella says quietly.

I shrug and reach for my hammer. One quick whack and one of her tiles cracks in half. Beside me, Stella jumps, and I catch the movement out of the corner of my eye.

"No need to apologize. She shouldn't have to act any different on my account." I crouch and start to yank up tiles with my bare fingers, most of them crumbling from age and misuse, and beside me, Stella's feet don't move. Even as the bathroom door opens and Abby comes out, Stella stays rooted to her spot.

After a moment, I look up at her. She stands there, her arms crossed and her face blank. "Thank you," she says, and then she walks away.

CHAPTER 18

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STELLA

Somehow, when I talked myself into letting Adam do this whole thing, I imagined it would be like it was when he was working on Mickey's place. I would only see him in passing, occasionally stopping to chat with him when he was taking a break. Always in another room, always with a wall between us.

But it's not like that. When he's here, there's nowhere to go that isn't within a few feet of him, nowhere to hide away except my bedroom, which starts to feel like a prison after about an hour, seeing as how it's the size of a large dog kennel.

All day Monday, I'm aware of him, like trying to read a book when the sun keeps shining in through the blinds and right into your eyes. Adam has this way about him, like if he hunches his shoulders and puts his hands in his pockets, he can keep every eye in the room from going straight to him, but he has shoulders like mountains and a chest that strains at his work shirts and the kind of sculpted face that always makes it hard for me to concentrate when he's in the same room as me. The whole package makes me uneasy, but not necessarily in a bad way. Just in an *aware* way.

Abby stays until Adam is gone, promising to come back the next day, and then they both leave and the condo is silent. I walk into the kitchen, where nothing but faded paint takes up the space where my top cabinets were and my floor is half gone, a slab of concrete peeking out, hard globs of glue here and there.

And I feel it, low in my belly.

A new beginning.

The next morning, I'm dressed for a job interview, all the way down to my tights, when Adam knocks on the door. Only, when I open the door, it's not Adam. It's a man who is somehow bigger than Adam, with blond hair hanging to his shoulders, a goatee, and biceps the size of watermelons. Across his left eye is a pink scar.

"G'morning," he says in an English accent, holding out one massive hand. "I'm Ford." I take his hand as Adam steps up behind him.

"He's going to help me get the counters taken up."

I think about the way he scoffed at my muscles the day before. I mean, sure, I haven't been to the gym in a while, but I'm far from helpless. When I see the size of Ford's arms, however, I get why Adam thought he'd be more useful. I step back to let them in and don't miss the way Adam's eyes brush down me, taking in my outfit, and I swear I see heat there, something that makes everything in me go tight. I ignore it. This weird pull I have toward Adam is simply pheromones and cavewoman instincts. That's all. It's making me hallucinate, clearly.

"Abby is on her way." I trail them into the kitchen, putting in my earrings. "She's just going to hang out while you're here." Adam's eyes turn to me, those eyes that already have this inherently sad quality to them, now filled with noticeable hurt. "It was Abby's idea," I whisper.

He sends me a smile that's almost not a smile at all, just the very ends of his mouth tilting upward. He turns and starts explaining where he wants to start to Ford, and I go to my room to slip on my shoes. Before I've even gotten them all the way on, Abby bursts into my room, her cheeks rosy, and shuts the door behind her.

"Are you aware that you have half the staff of a Chippendale's in your kitchen?" she stage-whispers, fanning herself.

“Try not to subtly suggest a threesome to either of them while I’m gone, okay?”

Her eyes light up, like I’ve given her an idea. “I absolutely will make no such effort. If you’re not going to take advantage of all that yummy testosterone, I will gladly step up to the plate.”

When I think about her being here all day, flirting with Adam, giving him that seductive look that I’ve seen her give men in bars, I get a sharp pang in my stomach. I have to focus down on my feet while I try to recover. I just got out of a three-year relationship, and Adam is here to work. His romantic life is not my business. If Abby wants to hit on him, she has every right.

“Feeling confident?” Abby asks.

I stop trying to get my foot into my right shoe and let my arms drop. “I’ve never felt less confident in my life.”

Abby steps forward and bends to take my face in her hands. Her nails are the same hot red as her lipstick. “Stella, you are such a fucking badass, so get your ass in gear and go get a job because I’m really looking forward to you being my Sugar Mama.”

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CHAPTER 19

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STELLA

Nowhere on the job application did it mention the absolute dungeon I would be working in. I stand in the records room with the hiring manager and try to suppress the chill that goes down my spine. A literal dungeon.

“May I ask,” I say, turning to the hiring manager who walked me through my interview upstairs before insisting we do the rest of the interview in the clerk’s office so I could see the work space. “In the digital age, why do you need so many paper records?”

The hiring manager, Mr. Hoffman, checks his phone, clicks out a text, and then says, “A lot of people still feel more comfortable signing paper contracts and policies. Makes them feel more secure, even though paper is about as permanent as a soap bubble.”

He checks his watch and then tilts his head toward a row of shelves, one of what seems like an infinite number, until I follow him. I’m more confused than anything else, stepping between two shelves of banker’s boxes that tower over our heads. My eyes are scanning the boxes, the labels written in Sharpie along the sides, when I hear the clang of a belt buckle.

My stomach crawls all the way up my throat when I turn to Mr. Hoffman and see that he’s undoing his pants. “What the hell are you doing?”

He stops, his eyebrows puckering. “I thought you wanted this job.”

God, I didn't even really want the job before, and I certainly don't want it now, if he's insinuating that I... "And that means, what exactly? That you get to whip it out?"

"It means," he growls, "you're going to give me a blowjob."

I step back so fast I knock into one of the boxes on the shelf behind me, the corner of it leaving a little spot of pain in my back. "Are you fucking kidding?" I can see now the ridge of him, already hard behind his boxers, and bile rises in my throat.

He has the audacity to say, "Are *you* fucking kidding? You're the seventh interview I've had this week. Everybody wants a job. You going to be a team player?"

I resist the outrageous urge to ask him how many of his seven interviews readily dropped to their knees, but for the love of God, I don't want to know. I turn and leave him, his dress pants down around his knees, and try not to vomit on my way back to my car.

Inside, I grip my steering wheel, trying to calm down. But then all the disgust and revulsion in me rises up into something different: anger, burning hot.

"Goddammit!" I scream, slapping my hand down on the steering wheel so hard that it stings. I press my forehead to it and breathe. I'm never going to get a good fucking job in fucking Baltimore.

CHAPTER 20

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ADAM

Abby is leaning over the counter between the kitchen and the living room in a way that I'm pretty sure is intended to press her breasts together and as far out of the collar of her top as they can go without spilling out completely, flirting. I'm pounding on my crowbar on the other side of the kitchen, mostly ignoring her as she doesn't seem to care which of us flirts back, and Ford is doing the job for both of us.

"So, you two met in the military? But you have an English accent. Don't you have to be American to join the American military?"

Ford stops hammering at the countertop to smile over at Abby. I can't tell if he's actually interested in her or not, but he's clearly enjoying the attention either way. "I was born in America. I'm a citizen. But my parents moved with me to England when I was just a baby. I spent most of my life there."

Abby leans her chin into her hand and smiles up at Ford. He's already a foot taller than her, but in this position, he towers over her so far that it's almost comical. "That's so romantic. I've always wanted to visit England, but I can never manage to get the time off work."

"Well, maybe someday—" Ford starts, but he doesn't finish because the front door has slammed open and Stella has rushed into the condo with these two big red spots on her cheeks, like her face is on fire from the inside. When she sees the three of us, she gingerly closes the door behind her, and it takes all my willpower to keep my feet planted, to keep from going to her and asking her what's wrong. That's not my job.

Abby meets Stella in the living room, and even though I shouldn't, I strain to hear their conversation as Abby settles Stella onto the couch and takes the spot next to her, their backs to me and Ford. They're speaking low, like they don't want us to hear, but I've slowed in my work, trying to eliminate some of the banging so that I can listen. Ford's watchful gaze is glued to me as he slows down, too.

"Wait, I don't understand," Abby says, suddenly loud, like she's forgotten we're here, or else doesn't really care.

But Stella hasn't forgotten. She twists her head just barely, glancing at me out of the side of her eye. I turn away quickly, hearing Stella hiss at Abby to be quiet. Ford and I lift the countertop up, repositioning it to sit comfortably between the two of us so that we can carry it outside. The voices in the living room have dipped low, words ping-ponging between the two women, but then Abby says, practically screeching, "He made you give him a blowjob?"

"He *what?*" The countertop slips from my hand, jerking Ford forward.

He grunts and says, "Goddammit, Adam," between clenched teeth.

I help Ford lower the countertop to the floor and turn to the women, who are both looking at me over the back of the couch. I can feel the blood pumping to my temples, a not-so-gentle *throb throb throb*. "Did someone touch you?"

Stella just stares, her face unreadable, and then she says, "No. He just told me I had to if I wanted the job."

The anger has already settled into me, filling all the cracks and crevices of my body. "Where?" I growl. "Tell me where he is."

Stella's eyes go wide. "Adam, it's fine. He didn't try to force me. I'll file a complaint with their management."

It's not enough. I want to beat into this man, whoever he is, like he's my favorite punching bag at Berserkr. I want to watch him bleed.

I don't realize I'm still staring at her, that she's still staring back, until Ford puts a hand on my arm. "Help me with this," he says, and we hoist the countertop up and out the front door. Once we've got it all the way into the bed of my truck, Ford shifts to face me. "I don't think that woman needs you to save her."

I smack my hand flat against the corner of the countertop. I want to smash my fist into it, but I can't work on the rest of Stella's condo with a broken hand. "I'm aware of that."

"Then why do you keep trying to?"

I grit my teeth and storm back inside. Abby and Stella have moved to her bedroom, and that's probably for the best. I can barely focus on what I'm doing, thinking about some asshole demanding Stella give him a blowjob in exchange for a job.

I put all my rage, all my angry focus, into tearing apart the kitchen. I rip the lower cabinet doors off their hinges even though I don't strictly need to and beat at the top of the kitchen island with a sledgehammer to get it to disconnect from the cabinet.

I'm not sure when Ford and Abby leave. I'm not sure of much of anything until Stella leans into my line of sight and says, "Adam, it's late. You should go home and get some sleep."

I've been prying up tile, my hands sore and achy, but I stop when I see the worry in her eyes. I don't want her to worry about me. I want to worry about her. I set my tools down and lean back on my heels on the ground.

"Are you alright?" I ask her. I've worked off most of my anger from earlier, leaving behind only a bone-deep concern.

"I'm fine," she assures me, taking a seat on the concrete beside me and crossing her legs. "Really. That man propositioned me, I said no, and that was the end of it."

"Because you know that if he had—" The anger is back, and she stops me with a hand on my chest. Under her palm,

my heart pounds hard, and I can see that she's tracking every pulse.

"He didn't," she says, her eyes falling to my mouth. Her lips part, and every part of my body goes hot and hard. I've never wanted anything more than I want to taste her lips, and with her hand pressed to me like it is, it's hard to remember why I shouldn't. I lean toward her until her nose is close enough for me to brush mine against, our breath mingling.

I told her I would be professional. If I kiss her right now, if I try to take this any further, I'm no better than that piece of shit she dealt with today. I pull back.

I press my hand over hers, feeling the softness of her skin against mine for a second before pulling her hand away from my chest and setting it in her lap. She looks down at it, like I've placed a mysterious object in front of her, and then up at me.

For a second, she looks almost confused and then maybe sad, and I have to look away from her so I don't lay it all in her lap, the way I feel about her and the way I want her. She has enough to deal with right now.

"I should go home," I tell her, and she just nods, not saying a word as I gather my things and leave.

CHAPTER 21

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ADAM

It takes me less than a week to redo the kitchen. I get to Stella's before sun-up and leave when Stella starts to murmur about dinner, and in the hours in between, I try not to think about her hand on my chest, the warmth of it through my t-shirt.

I give her quartz countertops and modern cabinets that I paint blue. She goes to interviews and comes back quiet and deflated. I convince myself that, somehow, fixing up her condo will also fix all of the imperfections of her life.

The day I start laying the tile in the kitchen, the last piece before I move on, I get a call from Danika. Stella is at her kitchen table, which is actually a patio table, just feet from me, trying to repair the clasp on a necklace with a pair of my pliers when I answer.

“Yeah?”

“Is that seriously how you answer your phone?” Dani says in my ear in that smoky voice of hers.

“It is when it's you. What's up, Dani?”

“I've got a girl for you.”

I glance up at Stella, just a flicker of my eyes, then back down at the tile. “I'm not interested.”

“You always say that.”

“That's because I'm always not interested. Is trying to set me up the only reason you called?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch the way Stella's hands stop moving, her head tilting slightly in my direction. My stomach gives a jolt of awareness.

"Shockingly, no. Ford asked me to call. He decided this morning to set up this fundraiser for the gym so we can put in some benches. Wants to know if you'll help out."

"Help out how?" I can't remember the last time Ford asked me to "help out" and it didn't end in a trip to the emergency room. Ford is a magnet for things and people that'll make you bleed, and it's almost always never his fault.

"He told me not to tell you because then you'll definitely say no."

"Oh. In that case, no." I've stopped trying to set the tile now, sitting on my knees in the middle of the kitchen, with my back straight and my phone pressed to my ear. I'm looking right at Stella, watching her fingers move while she tries to pretend she's not listening to our conversation.

"He also told me to tell you that you owe him."

I stare down at the tile, a generic grey linoleum that looks way more expensive than it is. I want to give Stella the best I can, but my parents' life insurance money can only go so far, and I've already sunk a huge chunk of it into this business. "What? How?"

"Says you never paid him for helping you rip up some countertops."

I stare at the countertops in question. I groan, and Stella openly stares now, one eyebrow raised. I'm starting to think she's been able to hear everything on both sides of the phone this whole time. Ford is right. I never paid him. Forgot all about it in the heat of everything else that happened. "Tell him I'll pay him."

"I think he wants you to do the fundraiser instead."

"Put him on the phone."

There's some shuffling and some quiet conversation on the other end of the line, and then Danika is back. "He's refusing

to speak to you. Fundraiser is next Saturday night at eight. See you there!”

I stare at my phone until the call vanishes and then I’m just staring at the background that came with the phone: a geometric pattern in primary colors. “Sometimes having friends isn’t worth it,” I grumble.

Stella chuckles. “I know exactly what you mean.” She finally puts down the necklace she’s been working on. Her eyes are gentle and kind when she looks at me, and it loosens something that’s been twisting tight in my chest since last week. We’ve spoken, and she’s been perfectly cordial and professional, but she’s also been too busy to make an attempt at small talk. Seeing as how I’m shit at starting conversations, it’s been a quiet few days.

“So, you’re almost done in here, right?” she asks. “Where are you working next?”

I brush my hands off on my jeans and look around. Stepping into the living room, I assess what all will need to be done. Baseboards, paint, replacing the book shelves, painting the fireplace. That’ll be a big job. I step over to the bathroom and switch on the light. I’ll have to order tile and fixtures. That could take a little while.

My eyes land on the door of her bedroom. She’s always kept it firmly closed, either because I’m here or because it’s some sort of pre-established habit.

“I guess,” I say, turning to her, “the bedroom would be the easiest. It’s probably just painting and baseboards. I could knock it out in a day or two. Maybe replace your windows.”

When I mention the windows, Stella stops, halfway out of her chair. “My windows? Is anyone really going to notice my windows in pictures?”

I pretend to assess her living room windows. I tap the glass with one angled knuckle. There’s nothing wrong with her windows, other than some holes in the screens. They’re outdated, but pull the curtains and no one would ever know or care. Except me.

New windows are sturdier. They cut the heat in the summer so her electricity bill will be smaller. Less chance of a bad storm tearing right through them and flooding the place, or worse, hurting her. So I say, “These crossbeam windows make the place look ancient. And I have to show potential clients that I can replace windows. That’s a specialized job.”

She’s standing beside me now, one hand on the glass, fingers splayed. Her nails are a deep plum color. “And you know how to do that?”

“I do.”

She looks up at me, and it’s the first time we’ve stood like this, right next to each other with nothing between us but air. I really notice for the first time how small she is, but not slight or frail. Made of muscle and bone and every beautiful thing in the universe.

“Let me show you my room,” she says, and when she walks by, I grit my teeth to keep from audibly gulping. How many times have I thought about her saying something like that at the start of one of my fantasies? I would imagine her leading me into her room and taking off her clothes. I shake the thought away and follow her.

Her bed is unmade. A double bed, a tall lamp, a dresser, a bookcase. I stare at the bed a beat too long. There’s a set of pajamas sticking out from under the comforter, a tank top and a pair of shorts. My skin goes hot just looking at them.

I clear my throat. “Do you prefer the carpet?” It’s a cream color but stained in places, and I try to keep my eyes fixed on it.

Stella scoffs. “God, no. My brother once got really trashed and puked in that corner.” She points at a spot behind the door. “And I swear, sometimes I can still smell it.”

I bite back a smile. “Okay. I can rip up the carpet, replace your windows and baseboards, and paint. Anything else?”

She stares at me for a long moment. “It’s *your* project, isn’t it?” Right. She takes a seat at the end of the bed, and my mind starts going haywire, completely without permission. Stella

laying back, removing her clothes one article at a time, opening her legs and looking at me expectantly.

I choke on my own spit. I start coughing, banging a fist against my chest as I back out of the room. Stella is watching me with concerned eyes, but I turn and head for the kitchen once I can breathe again, retreating for all I'm worth.

"Maybe I'll do the bathroom next," I mutter and get back to work.

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CHAPTER 22

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STELLA

By the next night, I've been told by various prospective employers that I'm not aggressive enough, not tech savvy enough, not qualified, not personable, and somewhat hostile. That last evaluation came on the heels of a comment by a middle-aged, red-faced sweaty man that I would be prettier if I let my hair down.

I'm on the verge of tears when I get back to my condo after dropping Abby off for a late flight to Tahoe to see her parents and hear Adam shout, "Fuck!" before something clatters hard to the ground. I've never heard Adam so much as exclaim, and hearing him now is a shock to my system, like being zapped.

"What? What is it?" I rush into the bathroom, where Adam is sitting on the edge of the tub, looking at my toilet. The top lid is off, sitting on the edge of the sink, and on top of that, there's a long plastic tube, broken in half. "What happened?" He's not even supposed to be doing anything to the toilet, I don't think.

He sighs. "I was changing out the faucet when I noticed your toilet was running. That's normal for old toilets. It just means your flapper needed to be replaced. But when I started taking stuff apart, your overflow tube snapped. It's an easy fix, but all the hardware stores are closed."

We stand in silence. I'm trying to process everything, but only one thought slips out. "You didn't have to fix my toilet." It's my first thought because Adam has been doing things far outside of the simple job he's supposed to be doing in order to

further his business: unnecessarily replacing the windows, asking me for a list of things I want done, even replacing all of my lightbulbs because it'll "look better in pictures.". He thinks I can't see right through him, but I can.

He looks at the broken tube. "I know. I'm sorry. I thought if I could help—"

"You're working too hard."

His lips come together, and his brow furrows. "I'm trying to get the job done quick."

"I know." I lean against my towel rack, praying he can't smell that said towel reeks of mildew. "But you don't have to."

"I've completely infiltrated your life."

"And I don't mind. Take a break. If it takes more time, it takes more time." He's been running himself ragged, staying late, sometimes long after I've fallen asleep on the couch, to finish "one more thing." He's got bags under his eyes, a paleness to his skin.

He scowls. "I broke your toilet in the middle of the night, and you're telling me to take a break?"

I shrug. "Maybe fix my toilet and *then* take a break."

He smiles down at the floor, but it only lasts a moment. "I'll hit the hardware store first thing in the morning. Until then..."

He looks up at me, and I feel the nerves start to riot in my stomach. I don't have anywhere to go. I just took Abby to the airport. Max is in Hawaii this week, *I think*, and it's not like I have anyone else. No parents, no friends I made at a part-time job or in college. I can't even afford to stay in a hotel for the night.

Mickey. He's really my only option. And not even the worst one. He has plenty of room for guests, his place is much more comfortable than mine, and I'm horny enough that I'll probably end up fucking him even if he did cheat on me. That is, if he isn't already in a relationship with the woman from the security footage. But I would know if that was happening. It

would be all over the internet, just like it was when we started seeing each other.

I reach for my phone, now a little disoriented at the thought of getting to have sex tonight. Having Adam around all the time, carrying around heavy tools, with his muscles sweaty and bulging beneath the sleeves of his t-shirts, it's created an itch that I need scratched in a big way. "I'll call Mickey."

"Stay at my place." The words pop out of him like someone pulled his string and his head exploded.

I still have my phone in my hand, Mickey's number pulled up, still at the top of my favorites list, but his words have stopped me cold. "What? I can't do that."

Adam must misread the look on my face because he says, "I swear, you can trust me. I would never do anything to—"

"It's not that," I cut him off because I don't even want him to suggest anything like that. I'm not afraid of Adam. I feel safe with him, which I thought was obvious in the way I let him stay alone with me well after dark every night.

He's waiting for me to explain, but how am I supposed to do that? How am I supposed to tell him that once I've been in his home, once I know what it's like, its smells and feels, I'll never be able to come back from it? I'll know a part of him that I'll never be able to unknow, and I'm afraid of what that might do to me. But of course, I can't say any of that.

So, I just say, "Okay."

And that's how I end up at Adam's house, a little three-bedroom place on the other side of the 395 from me. The outside is a burgundy wood, and the inside is warm and cozy. While Adam makes us some tea, I scan the picture frames on his fireplace, pictures of him with Ford and a small redheaded woman, pictures of him when he was younger, maybe a teenager, with his arms around a couple that must be his parents. And at the end, a photo of Adam, Ford, the redhead, and one more guy I don't recognize, all of them in battle fatigues.

I reach for the silver frame as a kettle whistles in the kitchen, jerking me out of my distraction. I set the frame back down and wander down the hallway. His kitchen is in the back of the house, the dark walls separating it from everything else in a closed floor plan. The kitchen is cluttered, papers all over the table and dishes piled in the sink, and when Adam turns to face me, it's with an apologetic look on his face.

I ignore it. I won't let him apologize for his own existence. "You were in the army?" I remember now, Abby mentioning it in an offhanded way, but I don't remember the details. Maybe she didn't have them.

He pauses, trying to catch up to my out-of-the-blue question. "The marines, actually. Right out of high school. That's where I met Ford."

I'm fascinated by this, by someone who has lived a life so completely different from mine. "And you both just happened to live here in Baltimore?"

He gives this weird little laugh, one half of his mouth tilting up. I'm caught by it while he talks, his full lips and his arched nose and his hair, blond and wild now that he's taken off the cap he always wears while he works. "Nah. I was here already. I grew up here, in this house, actually. Ford was out at his parents' farm in Pennsylvania. And Danika—she was in with us, and she runs a gym with Ford now—she was in New York. We all just kind of ended up here, once I set down roots. Ford moved out to open the gym, and Dani got jealous that we were both here, so she moved out, too."

I love the idea of Adam growing up here. Eating breakfast at this table every morning, posing with his prom date at the end of the hallway, mowing the lawn on the weekend. "Did your parents buy a retirement home in Florida or something?"

Whatever joy was marking his face vanishes. "No. They died while I was in Afghanistan."

His words slice through me, quick and sharp. "Oh, God. I'm so sorry."

He nods a thank you and turns to pour our boiling water into two mugs, teabag strings sticking out of them. “They left me this place, and I can’t bring myself to sell it.”

I’m not sure what it is about the quiet of his house or the way it feels like we’re tucked into a private corner of the world, but it makes it easier to open my mouth, to lay a piece of myself in front of him. “My parents are gone, too. They died when my brother and I were ten.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. That would be a tough thing for a kid to go through.” He hands me one of the mugs, and we let the silence linger for a moment before he says, “My room is up by the front door. You can take my bed.”

I choke on my tea. “What? No. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

He waves me off. “It’s okay. I’ve got a pull-out in the couch in my office. I’ll be perfectly comfortable.”

“Then let me sleep on the pull-out.”

“Stella.” His tone makes it very clear that the subject is no longer up for debate. “My mother raised a gentleman.”

“Did she also raise a misogynist?”

He breathes a quiet laugh. “This has nothing to do with you being a woman. You’re a guest. Ford sleeps in the bed when he gets too drunk to drive home.”

For some reason, the image makes me smile. Ford, big and burly and towering over everyone, stumbling into Adam’s room and collapsing on the bed.

I consider for another moment, knowing full well that it’s a terrible idea. This whole thing is. Because I was right. Now that I’ve seen his pictures and his messy kitchen and his sadness over his parents, I am emotionally compromised.

“I’ll find you something to sleep in,” he says, stepping out of the kitchen, and I don’t know whether or not I’m supposed to follow him, so I just do.

His bedroom is far less messy than the rest of the house, the bed unmade but clear of detritus. His nightstand holds a lamp, a half-empty glass of water, and a book on Maryland

business licenses that has a receipt sticking out of it. No piles of laundry or questionable garbage. Nothing but the smell of him, heavy in the air, like a fog.

He hands me a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants and places an unopened toothbrush on top of them. Is this what real adults do, have spare toothbrushes for guests?

“Bathroom’s through there.” He points to an open door in the corner. “The office is right by the kitchen, if you need anything. I’ll let you turn in.”

I watch his back as he retreats, the strong press of his muscles, before he closes the door behind him, leaving me alone in his bedroom. I smile down at the toothbrush he gave me. So economical in its generic packaging. I consider going through his stuff, looking for old love letters, trophies from serial murders, kinky porn. But I don’t think I’m willing to betray his trust.

I wonder, suddenly, if he’s gone through any of my things while he was alone in my apartment. He doesn’t seem like the type. I settle for sliding open the drawer of his nightstand, expecting tissues or lube or a sock or something, but there’s not so much as a box of condoms. Interesting.

I consider going into the bathroom to change but decide to strip down to my underwear in his bedroom instead. It feels strange to be standing almost naked in someone else’s bedroom. I slip off my bra and tug on his clothes, drooping off of me like an elephant’s skin. They smell like dryer sheets.

His bed, now that’s a different story. The bed smells like him, like body wash and man, that delicious smell of skin when someone first wakes up in the morning. I press my face into his pillow, and goosebumps spread from the top of my head, all the way down to my ankles, tingling heavy between my legs.

I run a hand down my thigh and fight with myself. I want to press my hand between my legs and my face into his sheets and get off to the smell of him and the fact that I’m in his bed, in his clothes. But even I know that’s catapulting over a huge line. I cannot come in this man’s bed, especially when he’s not

in it. Not when we're supposed to be keeping it professional, apparently.

So, instead, I pull the blanket over my head and try to fall asleep.

But an hour later, I'm still awake, staring up at the ceiling in the dark, listening for signs of Adam. I feel like he can hear me breathing, which is ridiculous of course because I can't hear a single whisper of sound from his side of the house. I imagine sneaking down the hallway, going into his office and seeing if he still wants to keep things professional. I want to know what that big body would feel like against mine.

There are two doors and the entire expanse of the house between us. At first, I can't hear anything but the static quiet in my ears. But then I *do* hear something. A grunt. Like someone in pain. And then a shout.

I shoot up in the bed, a chill running down my spine, listening intently. At first, I think I must have hallucinated, but then I hear it again, a distinct word: "No!"

I'm out of the bed before I've even processed what I'm doing. My footsteps seem impossibly loud as I run to the other end of the house. Outside the kitchen, I look at the three doors in the hallway, not sure which one is Adam's office. But then I hear his blood-curdling shout. "Help!"

I throw open a door on my left. It takes my eyes a moment to find him in the dark, so low to the ground on the pull-out couch. "Adam?"

"Please, please, please," he begs, and I feel my throat squeeze tight. He sounds like a child, begging like that. I don't think twice before climbing onto the bed and taking his face in my hands. He's slick with sweat, shirtless, and hot like he has a fever. He's trembling. And he's still asleep, his eyes clenched tight.

"Adam? Adam, wake up." I'm breathing hard, either from running from one side of the house to the other or from sheer terror. "Adam," I say louder. I climb on top of him, my knees on either side of his hips, and try to shake him awake by his

sweaty shoulders. “Adam, wake up. Please wake up.” My voice is almost as desperate as his is now, and I can feel the fear crawling up my throat. “Adam,” I cry.

He comes awake with a gasp, his eyes bright and unfocused in the light streaming in from the hallway. It’s like he can’t see me at all, like he’s still looking at something that’s not really there.

I still have his face in my hands. “You’re safe,” I tell him, my voice finally a normal volume. “You’re safe.”

His eyes clear and focus on me, softening. For a moment, there’s nothing but the sound of us breathing. And then his hands latch onto my hips, fingers splayed like he’s trying to make sure that I’m solid, digging into my flesh. “Stella?” he croaks.

I’m suddenly so aware of him that it’s almost painful. His hands slide along my waist until his fingertips are inching up under the t-shirt that’s his, and my blood pumps with adrenaline and lust. “Yeah, it’s me.”

He doesn’t respond, just keeps staring at me, and even though I want to push myself against him, slide up on his waist until we’re pressed together where it matters most, this isn’t how I want this to happen. Adam is in pain. Whatever he was dreaming about, it’s still in his head. So I pull away, start to lift myself off the mattress, but his hands tighten on me.

“Stay,” he whispers.

I can’t say no. How can I? His eyes are full of desperation, a desperation either for me or for anyone so he won’t be alone. I press a hand to his bare chest, feel the heat of him beneath my palm, and lower myself down onto the bed beside him.

As soon as I hit the mattress, he pulls me up against him, holding me to his side with one strong arm that doesn’t allow me even the slightest room to move. And I’m fine with that. I want to be as close to him as possible. I slide my hand up to his throat and feel him swallow under my fingertips.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask, and his entire chest vibrates with the echo of his voice when he answers.

“No.”

So, we don't speak. We lay there in the dark, and I track the slowing of his heartbeat and his breathing, until I'm certain he's asleep.

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CHAPTER 23

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ADAM

When I wake up in the morning, everything comes back to me in vivid colors. The same nightmare as always, waking up with Stella in my lap, holding her until I couldn't keep my eyes open anymore.

Now, the bed next to me is empty, and I can hear her in the kitchen, quietly moving around as I pull myself out of bed and look down at my dick, tenting my boxers like it's trying to reach out for her. The morning jerk-off routine will have to wait today.

I throw on some clothes and follow the smell of breakfast out to Stella, who's trying to make room on the kitchen table for two plates full of food.

"Here, let me," I say, moving forward and scraping up piles of papers. I transfer them to one of the empty windowsills. When I turn around, she's set the table and is waiting for me to join her with a gentle smile.

"How are you feeling today?" she asks when I've settled beside her. Her eyes shoot to me and then away, and I want to kiss her. And not in that way that I sometimes fantasize about kissing her when I'm alone in bed at night. All tongue and teeth and the taste of her. This is something else. I want to kiss her slow and soft and with all the *thank yous* I have in my chest. I want to kiss her into the quiet, take my time.

Because the way she looked at me last night when I woke up and found her in my arms, it wasn't disgust or pity. It was worry. She told me I was safe, and it calmed everything inside

me. And when she looks at me now, I know she's not avoiding asking me outright what the hell is going on with me because she's uncomfortable. She's not outright asking because she wants *me* to be comfortable. She didn't run. She's still here.

"I'm doing great. Thank you."

"Does that happen a lot?"

I cut into the eggs she made me and put some in my mouth before I nod. I'm not going to tell her that it's almost every night, that when I'm not having night terrors, I'm having dreams about doing unspeakable things to her. There doesn't seem to be any in-between these days.

She nods back but doesn't comment. She's leaving me room if I want it, but I don't. After a beat of silence, she says, "So, what's the plan for my toilet?"

I blink over at her. "What?"

"My toilet? You know, that giant porcelain thing that gets its own room in my home?"

I sigh out a laugh. "Right. Hardware store should be open by now, so I'll run by, get a new overflow tube, and have it fixed in no time."

"Thank you."

It seems ridiculous after everything she's done for me that she would thank me for fixing something I broke with my own two hands. She tilts her fork to cut her eggs, and I reach out to still her hand.

Her gaze meets mine, and I make sure not to look away as I say, "Thank *you*, Stella."

I don't miss the way her eyes drop down to my mouth, the way her hand flinches under mine, and I take my hand away quick before I give myself permission to do something I can't take back.

CHAPTER 24

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ADAM

I watch Stella through the open door of the bathroom. She's putting on her shoes in the living room, getting ready to go to her interview, her back to me. I'm taking apart her sink, but I can't stop looking at her. The back of her neck is flushed pink, and I wish I could see straight into her brain.

She lets out a little sigh, and it does something to my chest. I focus back on my work, force myself not to look up at her again, but I still listen to the drag of her breath in the silent condo, the sweep of her hair as she combs her fingers through it, the tap of her shoes as she goes into the kitchen.

And then the lights go out.

The bathroom plunges into darkness, the only light filtering in from the open windows in the living room. Outside the bathroom door, the condo has taken on a grey quality, and Stella is hovering between the kitchen and the living room, a bottle of water in her hand and a quietly stoic expression on her face.

I straighten, leaving the sink in pieces, and watch as she takes a deep breath, and then her face crumples. I push the bathroom door open all the way as Stella throws her bottle of water across the room, where it slams into the wall with a *pop*. When it hits the ground, water gurgles out onto the floor. She falls onto one of her bar stools and drops her face into her hands.

"Hey," I say, rushing over and crouching down in front of her. "Hey, Stella." She doesn't look up at me, just keeps her

head bowed, and even though I know better, even though I've drawn lines for myself, lines that I keep crossing, I reach for her face.

The heat of her skin meets mine, wet with tears, and I tilt her face up until I can see her eyes. They're blurry and unfocused. "Everything's going to be okay," I tell her. And I don't even know if that's true. Her power probably just got turned off, she seems to be struggling to find a well-paying job, and she just ended a relationship that lasted years. How can I tell her that everything is going to be okay?

Because I'll make sure of it. If I have to move her into my damn house, I will.

"I should be able to do this," she says in a watery voice. I'm still holding her face, pushing away her warm tears with my clumsy thumbs. "I'm an adult. I should be able to pay my electricity bill. Other people pay their electricity bills."

"I'll help. I can loan you the money."

She groans and pushes my hands away, but not like she minded me touching her, just like she's frustrated by my suggestion. "I'm not going to take your money. You're already doing far too much, and I don't need your charity."

There's no real heat in her voice, but I know she means it. "Stella, people need help sometimes. It doesn't make you weak or incapable. You're getting your feet back under you."

She's quiet for a second, just sniffles. "Look at you. You're starting your own company. I mean, you were working on Mickey's place. That's a huge job. You have direction and your own house, with electricity and everything."

I put up a hand to stop her. "My parents left me that house. They also left me enough money to get all the permits for my company. And I don't know if you remember, but I got fired from my last job."

She shakes her head. "No. No, Adam. You're doing great."

"So are you," I say, stepping on the end of her sentence.

Her eyelashes are still wet, her cheeks still flushed, and I'm pretty sure she's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen in my life. Her eyes roam my face, almost like she's seeing me for the first time, like she's woken from a dream to find my face. Her gaze dips to my lips, and I stop breathing, heat blooming low in my stomach. I know I've crossed the line, am currently on the other side of it right now, but if she kisses me, if she even makes it clear that she wants *me* to kiss *her*, that line is going to go up in smoke. I'm done trying to fight it. My self-control is all used up from keeping myself at a distance this long.

Her lips part, and I wait. Wait for her to seal my fate.

“Do you think you can fix the sink in the dark?”

I stare at her mouth, feeling like she just asked me a question in another language. “Um...” I stutter. “Yeah. Yeah, I think so. I've got a Maglite in the truck.”

She nods, her eyes still on my mouth. “I need to get to my interview.” She's up off the stool and out the door before I have a chance to beg her to stay.

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CHAPTER 25

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STELLA

I'm trying to fix my makeup in my car before I go into the interview, but it's mostly ruined and I'm out of time. I grab my stuff and go into the building, trying to keep my face down in hopes that all the blotchiness from crying earlier will be gone by the time I get to the floor where I'm supposed to have my interview.

I don't know much about the company, some sort of charitable organization that helps establish canine rescues out in the country, but I've applied for so many of these jobs now that I've stopped entirely reading the job descriptions.

"I'm here for an interview with Ms. Jones," I say at the front desk, glancing into the glass behind the receptionist to try and see my reflection, but I'm a little too blurry.

"Of course," the receptionist says with a smile. "She'll see you right through there." She gestures at an open door on the other side of the desk, and I make my way over. The entirety of the business seems to be made up of two offices and the front desk, and for some reason, I find that comforting. All the jobs I've applied for over the last few weeks have been at large corporations.

Ms. Jones, a woman who looks roughly old enough to be my mother, is so focused on something on the desk in front of her that she doesn't hear when I step into the doorway of her office. I rap one knuckle on the door and smile.

"Ms. Jones?"

The woman looks up, and I'm surprised by the smile she gives me, so sincere and so bright. She gestures at the chair across the desk from her. "Hello! You must be Stella. Please, have a seat."

As soon as I sit down, I feel a strange peace wash over me. This feels so comfortable, so familiar, and I know I want to work here, immediately. When was the last time I felt any sort of calm in an office building? "Thank you for having me in today," I tell her, and I mean it with my entire body. I forget about my makeup and whether or not my cheeks are spotty.

"You're here about the volunteer position," she says, leaning back in her seat and crossing her arms over her lap, and I feel everything inside me collapse like something dropped out of a window going *splat* on the pavement.

"The volunteer position?" I croak. "I, um, no. I'm here about a paid position. A communications liaison?"

Ms. Jones' face goes sour. Her mouth pulls down into a frown, and she sits up straight in her chair again. "The communications position is, in fact, a volunteer position. Really all the position entails is visiting local businesses to hand out flyers and make connections." All of my disappointment must be written across my face because her shoulders sag before she says, "I'm so very sorry, Ms. Hart. Perhaps the ad wasn't clear."

"No, no." I put my hands up to stop her, feeling all the heat flood to my face. I'm sure I'm twice as blotchy now as I was before. "I'm sure I didn't read closely enough. It's my fault." And it is. It most certainly is.

I stand, and she does, too. "We have your resume should another paying position open up," she says as she walks me to the door of her office, a grand total of four steps. "I looked it over, and I really do think you would do great here." We pause by the door, and she sends me a look that I recognize as *are you sure?*

"I'm sorry, but I need an income." A month ago, any volunteering endeavor would have made me happy, but without Mickey's money...

“Of course,” she whispers. “Give me a call if you change your mind.”

And in less than five minutes, I’m right back out into the hall where I started. I stand at the elevator for a moment, staring at the buttons, unable to push any of them. *Just reach out and push it*, I tell myself, but I feel numb. I can’t move.

There’s a door next to the elevator, a bathroom, and I rush inside and wait for the swinging door to fall closed behind me before I plant both elbows on the sink, drop my face into my hands, and start to cry. God, what a shitty day. Just one in a long line of shitty days.

My makeup is officially ruined. I stare at myself in the mirror, my mascara streaking down my cheeks. I look a wreck. I grab a few paper towels from the dispenser, wet them, and try to wipe away the makeup completely. When I’m done, the flush of my tears is more obvious, but at least I don’t look like a sad clown anymore.

The door opens behind me, and I bow my head, pretending to be looking for something in my purse as someone comes in. I wait for them to take one of the stalls behind me, but the footsteps stop.

“Excuse me?”

I spin around. The receptionist is standing between me and the door, wringing her hands in front of her. “Sorry,” I say, snatching up my purse. “Am I in your way?”

“No!” She kind of scuttles toward me and then stops. “I just wanted to come in here and tell you that I really admire you.”

She could have said she was the secret wife of an orange alien, and I would have been less shocked than I am right now. “I’m sorry?”

She lets out a nervous laugh and comes closer, until she’s standing at the sink beside me, looking at me in the mirror. “Last year, I lost my dad. I was working full time at this awful job and trying to juggle a full schedule at school, and it all just kind of collapsed in on me.”

I'm watching her mouth move, trying to make sense of what she's saying. Her makeup is done so well that she doesn't even look like she's wearing any, and she keeps pushing her long brown hair out of her face with the tip of her index finger. Beside her, I look like a ghost.

"I don't know if you remember, but earlier this year, you posted a thing about you and your brother on the anniversary of your parents' deaths."

"I remember," I mouth, but the words don't really have any sound behind them. Mickey was always pushing me to do more on my social media accounts, since so many people were following me because of him. He thought people would want to know more about my personal life instead of just the fact that I was dating him. And so, on the anniversary of my parents' death, I was feeling sad, and a phone call to Max convinced me to write something sappy on Instagram.

In the mirror, the receptionist shrugs. "It made me feel like, if you could go through everything you went through and be where you are today, then I could make it through it all, too."

I bite down hard, my teeth grinding together, so that I don't cry. God, I miss my parents. And right now, I really miss Max. I nod because I can't say anything, can't open my mouth, can't tell her that yes, I made it through all of that, but where am I now? What did all that grief bring me to? A bottomless well of job interviews, a failed relationship, a lost sense of purpose.

So, I just watch her send me an awkward little smile and then leave the bathroom. And then I'm crying again. I really am a fucking mess.

I should probably leave, but now that that post is on my mind, I pull out my phone and open Instagram, scrolling through until I find it. I posted a picture of Max and myself that we took the day we moved to Baltimore together, the two of us young and optimistic. We moved out here because Max got a scholarship to study photography, and I was ready to jump into the workforce. What a difference a few years can make.

I close Instagram and dial Max's number.

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CHAPTER 26

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STELLA

Adam has been working on my condo for a little over a week, and it looks nothing like my condo. Max and I bought this thing together four years ago, and now Adam is bent over at a ninety-degree angle, moving the couch where Max slept to inspect a divot in the wood floor. He straightens and settles his big hands on his narrow hips. “I don’t think we’ll touch the living room floors. They’re in surprisingly good shape. I do think we should move the furniture out before we photograph.”

I cross my arms. “What, you don’t like my futon?”

He raises one blond eyebrow at me, and my stomach tightens. Standing there, looking at me like that, he looks like something out of a clothing ad, except I don’t think they have high-fashion ads for paint-stained jeans and steel-toed work boots.

Over by the fridge, a bottle of water in his hand, Ford chuckles. “Girls on futons have more fun.”

I pull my attention from Adam and turn to Ford. “Are you speaking from experience?”

Ford winks at me and lifts his water to his mouth. When I look back at Adam, he’s staring at Ford with his jaw clenched tight. He sees me staring and focuses on opening the bottle of water Ford brought him from the gas station down the street. I wonder if he’s thought at all about what happened two days ago, when I cried in front of him and he wiped my tears away.

How I almost kissed him. Again. I've thought of it every time I've stopped moving for the last forty-eight hours.

"How's the interviewing going?" Ford asks, pulling me out of the memory.

Not what I want it to be, I want to tell him, but I don't want to sound ungrateful. I *am* grateful that when I called Max and asked for the money for the electricity bill, he asked me why I hadn't called him sooner. I'm grateful for the weight that lifted from my chest when I came home to a fixed toilet, lights that turned on, and extra money in my bank account. I just wish I had done it all on my own.

My eyes lift to watch Adam. I'm grateful for him, too. I'm grateful that he was there at Mickey's that day and grateful he was here to talk some sense into me and grateful that he's ripping apart my old, rotted condo without an ounce of judgement.

"I feel like my last one went really well," I tell them. "Hoping I'll get a call."

Adam stands close enough to me that I can feel the heat radiating off of him from the work he's been doing since early this morning. I fight my body's urge to step closer, but I can't keep myself from looking up at him, from studying the curve of his jaw and the jut of his Adam's apple. He pulls the water bottle away from his lips and looks down at me, his gaze sharp and hot like he knows exactly how hard I'm fighting to keep myself from him.

In the kitchen, Ford's booming voice breaks in. "Stella?"

I clear my throat and look away from Adam, my brain all mushy. "Um, yes?"

Ford perches one hand on his hip. "Do you have plans Saturday night?"

I feel the way Adam stiffens beside me, but I refrain from looking in his direction, in case he doesn't want Ford to know that whatever he's said seems to be stressing Adam out. "Not as of yet."

“My gym is having a fundraising event. You should come.”

I snort. “I’m not really in a position to donate funds.”

One side of Ford’s mouth perks up. “We need extra hands for thunderous applause. Come. You’ll have a good time, I promise.”

I glance over at Adam. I want to meet his friends and see where he hangs out when he’s not here. “Yeah, okay. I’ll be there.”

Ford claps his hands together and rubs them back and forth like he’s trying to rid them of dust. “Well, I’ve got to get going. Lots to do for the big event. I’ll see you both there.” He’s gone, his empty water bottle still sitting on the edge of my brand-new countertop, and I’m left alone with Adam. He’s finishing up for the day, gathering his things.

“You don’t have to come Saturday night, if you don’t want to.”

Something pinches in my stomach. “You don’t want me there?”

A paint scraper falls out of his hand and clatters to the floor. “I didn’t say that. I just don’t want you to feel obligated because Ford...” He picks up the scraper and motions with it to the spot where Ford was standing a moment earlier.

I bite back a smile. Is he jealous of the way Ford seems to effortlessly flirt with everyone? Does he think I want to flirt back? Sure, Ford is gorgeous in an almost supernatural way, but I’m not interested.

“I don’t feel obligated. I’d like to see the gym the two of you are always talking about.”

He tucks his scraper in his back pocket and nods down at the floor. “Great. I’ll see you tomorrow, Stella.”

When he finally closes the door behind him, I can feel the blush that’s painted all along my skin.

CHAPTER 27

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ADAM

Friday morning, I'm standing in Stella's bedroom. Under my boots, the floor I put in yesterday is gleaming. The condo is silent except for the sound of my breathing as I stare at Stella's bed. It's pulled into the center of the room, away from the walls I'm about to paint.

Yesterday, Ford was with me, pulling up carpet, so I was distracted enough by the work and the conversation not to be thinking about the way Stella's bedroom smells like her, the scent of lavender and coconut. But today, it's just me and the room, no distractions. I scan the room, looking for bottles of body spray or body lotion, but get caught on everything else—her oval-shaped hair brush, the stack of books on her nightstand, a pair of sky blue socks left by the foot of the bed, even a guitar on a stand in the corner of the room that I wonder if she can play.

Her dresser, pushed up against her bed, has one drawer hanging open, and even though I know it's an invasion of privacy, even though I know on some level, this makes me the very worst kind of person, I step forward and peek inside.

And almost swallow my tongue. Panties. Lacy red and pink and blue things with matching bras, all spread out like they've been thrown in in a hurry. One pair is white silk with a little bow over the apex of the crotch. I slam the drawer closed when I see it, even as I know I'll be thinking about that bow until the day I die.

The front door opens, and I rush to grab the paint sprayer up off the tarp where I left it. I'm spraying sunshine yellow

paint on the accent wall behind her bed when she calls out my name.

“Adam?”

It’s too much for me. The domesticity of her keys jangling as she tosses them onto the table by the door, the way she immediately checks for me, the way she comes into the room in her slacks and vest. It’s enough to make me stop and stare. It’s enough to make me wish it could last forever.

She opens her mouth to say something, but then her eyes go to the wall behind me and her whole face lights up. I’m so lost in the way her eyes are shining that I forget about the sprayer in my hand entirely.

“I love it,” she breathes, and in that second, it’s all worth it: the fact that I’m going to go broke for this project, going home completely dead on my feet at the end of every day, jerking off to fantasies of her every night and every morning because I can’t go anywhere near her.

I turn back to the wall. “Figured I’d get started on painting while the floors set. And then—” I stop because every time the thought crosses my mind, I have to, like my brain blinks off and back on again. “And then, once the painting is done, I’ll be finished.”

There’s a long silence, and then she says, “Finished?”

I stop spraying and turn to face her. She looks like a kid in a grocery store who can’t find her parents. “Yeah,” I say. “Job’s almost done.”

She’s all the way across the room, but I hear it when she takes in a sharp breath. She starts to worry her hands, and she’s looking down at them when she says, “And then what?”

I set the sprayer back down on the tarp. “Photos. Sprucing up the website. Maybe a virtual walk-through.”

“And then you’ll be gone.” The words come out a whisper, and I take a step toward her. I feel like there’s a string tied between the two of us, always tugging me closer to her, but I stop myself. I have to. Because the way she said that, like it’s going to kill her as much as it’s going to kill me to walk away,

it's enough to make me want to reach for her. I want to bury my face in her hair. And maybe bury some other parts of me in some other parts of her.

But she needs a friend. And I need to be that for her right now. "It'll be great to have me out of your hair, right?"

"Adam?" Her lips part, and as I watch, entranced, her tongue peeks out to wet the bottom one. I want to chase it with my own. I want to know what she tastes like. "This place will feel empty without you here."

There are a million things I could say.

I don't say any of them.

I go back to the sprayer, but when I pick it up and look down at it, it's like I've forgotten how to use it. It feels odd in my hand now, like none of the joints under my skin fit together anymore. I grip it tightly and face down the sunshine wall, but I can feel the heat of Stella's gaze right between my shoulder blades. I turn back to her, but she looks away.

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CHAPTER 28

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STELLA

When I get to Berserkr Gym on Saturday night, I'm quivering. Something has changed. A small shift, like a crack in a bone that's so fine that it's just the slightest ache. Yesterday, standing under that golden wall and hearing Adam say that he's almost at the end of what he's doing on the condo twisted something inside me, and I feel like I'm never coming back from it.

People are filing into Berserkr, and every time the door opens, a heavy bass beat flows out into the air like it's a night club instead of a boxing gym. Through the glass front doors, I can make out bodies, swaths of hair and skin and clothing, and then there's Adam and Ford, both of them half a head taller than anyone else. They're having what looks like a very intense conversation, Adam making motions with his hands and Ford listening with his arms crossed tight.

Ford almost seems like he's flat-out ignoring Adam, his eyes moving over the street in front of the gym, until they travel all the way to the parking lot on the other side. He spots me, and a grin spreads across his face. He raises a hand to wave me in, and Adam turns. I meet them at the door, just barely inside, where the music is loud enough to be felt under my feet even though this isn't even the main room. It's just an entry hall, long and painted burnt yellow. Off to my left, a reception desk stands empty. There are schedules posted to the wall behind it: boxing, kickboxing, self-defense, functional training, private sessions.

“I’ve just been informed,” Adam says by way of greeting once he’s close enough for me to hear him over all of the other noise, “that when I agreed to help out with this fundraiser, I agreed to be auctioned off like a piece of antique furniture.”

A very petite, red-haired woman stops beside Adam and claps a hand on his shoulder. My eyes get caught on the way her fingers curve around him. “Don’t be ridiculous. Antique furniture can’t take its shirt off.”

Adam scowls down at her. “I’m not taking my shirt off.”

She looks up at him with a pair of innocent eyes and runs the tip of one of her fingers down the curve of his arm. “What’s the point of working so hard on those pecs if you’re not going to show them off?”

Adam doesn’t answer, and the woman who still hasn’t been introduced to me says, “You’re Stella, right?” When I nod, she reaches for my hand and gives me a solid yank in the direction of the gym.

“Dani!” I hear Adam shout behind us, but she ignores him and keeps pulling me along.

It’s my first instinct to skitter to a stop when we step into the gym. I’ve never been in a boxing gym. In one corner, punching bags, speed bags, and ropes hang from the ceiling. In another corner, mats cover the floor and walls, clearly anticipating people throwing each other around. Another corner houses free weights, medicine balls, and other conditioning equipment. And in the very center of it all: a boxing ring. I’ve never seen an actual boxing ring before, and we zip by it so fast that I don’t even get a good look at it before we’ve moved on. Dani pulls me to a stop at the bar, pressed into the final corner of the gym, not even waiting for a space to open up for her. She just slides us to the other side with the bartender and the mountains of liquor bottles. Facing the crowd, I see that most of them are already red-faced with too much alcohol.

There doesn’t seem to be a consistent dress code. Some people are dressed in cocktail attire, while some are in chinos or even jeans. Dani is wearing a sweater and a tight pair of

jeans, but there are other woman in dresses that drop below their knees. I pulled the nicest thing I had out of my closet that wasn't meant for an office: my favorite summer dress, white with daises the size of dinner plates.

“Drinks on me,” Dani says, leaning back against the bar and winking at the bartender, who fumbles a half-glass of clear alcohol and just barely catches it before it hits the ground, effectively soaking his shoes and one of his sleeves. “What’s your drink of choice?”

I feel a little like I’ve stepped into a dream, one of those dreams where it almost makes sense and then you’re suddenly swimming through lava with a mermaid that looks like your old boss.

“An Old Fashioned?”

Dani smiles and tilts her chin in the direction of the bartender. “You heard the woman,” she says. And when she turns to me, it finally really settles in how insanely pretty she is, with big, full lips, a shock of red hair settled on her shoulders, and beautifully sculpted cheekbones.

“I’m Danika,” she says, arms crossed as she leans back against the bar. “I own this place with Ford.” When she says this, my accumulated knowledge all snaps into place: Adam on the phone, talking about the fundraiser; the picture of Adam and Ford and a mysterious redhead on his mantle. Danika. Was she flirting with Adam earlier? Are they together? Didn’t she call that day to set Adam up with some other woman?

“You were in the marines with Adam and Ford.” This seems like the safest thing to bring up.

She smirks in an adorable, self-proud way. “Yep.” She’s so small compared to them, even though I can see the shape of her biceps through the sweater she’s wearing. She’s far more muscular than I could ever dream of being. But I can’t quite imagine her doing everything Ford and Adam could.

“Did you like it?”

She shrugs one shapely shoulder. “I fit there, but when I took a piece of metal the size of my hand to the side, I had a

hard time shaking it off.” My eyes immediately drop to her torso, as if she’ll still have a blood-stained bandage there. She sees and waves me off. “It didn’t tear through anything important.”

The bartender slides a beer and my drink over to Dani, and she passes the heavy glass over to me. “So, you box?” I ask, taking a long, satisfying gulp of my drink.

She glances over her shoulder. “I do a little bit of everything.” She says it with such confidence, such surety, that I’m amazed. She takes a swig of her beer. “Have Adam bring you by sometime. I’ll give you a free lesson.”

I glance over at the boxing ring. I can’t imagine being in there with Dani. Just the thought has me so intimidated that I feel sick to my stomach. “I don’t think I could.”

Dani’s face doesn’t change. It’s still that expression like she owns the world. But one of her perfectly shaped eyebrows lifts. “Do you want to?”

I imagine the power of connecting a punch so hard that it vibrates through your whole body. What would that even feel like? I feel a sudden pull rise up in my chest. “Yes,” I say simply.

At that, Dani finally smiles. “Good. Then you definitely can.”

I know I shouldn’t ask. There are a million reasons why I definitely should not ask. But while I’m still internally trying to stop myself, the question pops out. “Have you and Adam ever dated?” He’s never really talked about her, but what if she’s the real reason he’s been keeping his distance or the real reason he doesn’t want her to set him up on a date? What if they’re not together, but he has feelings for her?

Dani’s beer stops centimeters from her mouth. “Oh, definitely not. Absolutely no way. Adam’s basically my brother. Plus, he’s kind of a tough nut to crack. I did fuck Ford once, but that’s as close to a relationship as I’ll ever get with either of them.”

I don't even know why I asked. What would I have done if she had said yes? Or what if she had said they were friends with benefits or something like that? And why would it even matter? It's not like I have any kind of claim on Adam. Quite the opposite. We're helping each other out in a very professional manner. There are at least a dozen reasons why even glancing in Adam Lake's direction is worse than any other bad decision I've made over the past month, beginning with the fact that we're both clearly emotionally and probably psychologically fucked up and ending with the fact that we know virtually nothing about each other. For example, I had no idea that *this* was the kind of world Adam was a part of, a world of boxing rings and fancy fundraisers and beautiful women. If Adam was out of my league before, now we're playing two completely different sports.

"But look," Dani says, "Adam is quite literally the best guy I know."

I finally see a true softness in her eyes, but now I'm pretty sure she has the wrong idea. "Adam and I aren't—"

Just then, the lights in the building dim, and a cheer spreads through the room like a gentle ocean wave. A spotlight appears above the ring, and the crowd seems to shift, everyone taking a step closer.

"Come on." Dani grabs my hand again, and I try not to slosh my drink as we move back to the other side of the bar and push our way to the front of the crowd. "Stay here!" Dani shouts in my ear and then vanishes before Ford swings himself between the ropes and into the ring.

The cheer this time is shrill. Ford grins out at everyone, so very clearly loving the attention. After a moment where he's just standing there, smiling with his perfect teeth and his hair pulled back into a low bun, he puts his hands up to calm the crowd.

"Hello, everyone, and thank you so much for joining us tonight. I'm Ford. Welcome to my home, the apple of my eye, the epitome of my soul, Berserkr Gym." There's another round

of applause, and I awkwardly attempt to clap with my drink still in my hand.

When the applause dies down, Ford goes on. “When I left the marines, I thought I had nothing to offer the world. I thought I had nothing left inside me at all. And then someone reminded me that I had something valuable to share. I had an extensive knowledge on how to be strong, how to fight, how to defend myself, and I didn’t know how much this corner of Baltimore needed that. If everyone could give my buddy, Adam, a round of applause, please.”

I can’t see Adam, only know he’s there by the way Ford gestures down at the ground by his side. Even on my tiptoes, he’s blocked by a corner of the boxing ring.

“And, of course, I am only half of this operation. My better half, my business partner, Danika, organized this event, so you have her to thank for what you’re about to be a part of.”

Another round of applause.

“Now, before we begin, I’d like to affirm that this auction is all in good fun. If you win an evening out with one of these lucky men, it doesn’t give you any ownership over them. I expect everyone involved to be kind and consenting.”

There’s a small laugh, but only because Ford pulls a silly face before hopping out of the ring. From somewhere in the distance, Dani’s voice sounds through a speaker system. “Is everyone ready for the fun to begin?” There’s a very long and loud cheer. “For our very first specimen: please give it up for Julian Howard!” Without warning, a broad-chested man climbs up into the ring, almost as tall as Ford and just as massive.

“Julian Howard,” Dani goes on in that sultry voice of hers, “is a volunteer firefighter for the Baltimore Fire Department.”

Julian cups his hands around his mouth and shouts, “Station Fourteen!”

Someone in the crowd shouts back, “Station Fourteen!”

Dani’s breathy laugh covers the room. “Julian has two cats, two dogs, and two ex-wives. You gotta love a man who’s

consistent. He loves sushi, stouts, and his grandmother, Lois. The bidding will begin at one hundred dollars!”

There are immediate shouts from the crowd, the bidding quickly climbing up to four hundred dollars with Dani’s stealthy guidance.

I watch as another man is brought up, who Dani introduces as Clark. He is an impressively built veterinarian with an adorably crooked smile, and by the time a very enthusiastic woman has paid six hundred fifty dollars for the chance to buy him dinner and win over his gentle heart, I’ve run out of drink and have headed back to the bar for another. Only, once I get there, I realize an Old Fashioned won’t be enough, and I order a double of bourbon instead. Another man is brought into the ring.

The bartender barely glances at me as he drops my drink in front of me. I’m not as captivating as Danika, it would seem.

“How much?” I shout over Dani’s voice introducing the new man.

The bartender finally stops and regards me. After looking at so many of these large, muscled men, he seems sort of *average*. Maybe that’s why Dani didn’t look twice at him. “You’re with Dani, right?”

I nod. I mean, I guess so? I’m with Adam, which means I’m basically with Ford and Dani, too.

“On the house.” He’s moving before I have a chance to ask him if he’s serious. Isn’t it bad enough that I’m taking up space when I don’t have money to donate to the gym? Now I’m not even paying for drinks?

I take my bourbon and have swallowed half of it by the time I hear Dani say into the microphone, “Our next man for bid is our very own best friend, Adam Lake!”

I spin around in time to watch Adam bend between the ropes and straighten inside the ring. Even with his shirt on, I can see the shape of every one of his chest muscles. I take another long swallow of my bourbon.

“Adam Lake is an ex-Marine. He owns his own home repair business, he can bench press three hundred pounds, and he has a heart of gold. Not to mention, he’s single.”

Wolf whistles abound, and my stomach tightens. I feel like the room has shifted slightly, tilting up at an angle that has me losing my feet. I suddenly remember the smell of his sheets, the feel of his bare chest under my hands, the curve of his lips around the head of a bottle, and I’m flooded with heat, from my cheeks all the way down to my knees.

I reach back and grip the bar, and as Dani starts the bidding, Adam’s gaze moves across the room, and I wonder if he can see faces with that light in his eyes, a question that’s immediately answered when his gaze stops on me. I feel his gaze like lightning through my gut. Everything in my body goes tight, and in the ring, Adam’s hands clench into fists.

Holy shit.

Since I met Adam, he’s been a small flame, like something at the tip of a candle wick. But now, it’s like someone set my house on fire, and I *want* him, ferociously.

“Sold! Tonight’s record! Twelve hundred dollars!”

The words pull me away from Adam’s eyes. A woman in the crowd is whooping and celebrating, and I feel something sickening at the bottom of my gut. She’s pretty. Very pretty. Tall and well built, in a dress that has a slit all the way up one of her shapely thighs. By the time I look back at Adam, he’s gone, replaced by Ford.

“And last but not least, by any stretch of the imagination, our fearless leader, Ford Armstrong! Ford is also an ex-Marine, and, as you all know, the co-owner of Berserkr Gym. He’s more brawn than brains, but that brawn is pretty impressive. Since he’s a one-of-a-kind, premium treat, a first-class specimen, I think we need to up our starting price. Let’s start the bidding at five hundred dollars!”

As she finally gets to the number, in an act of true showmanship, Ford rips his shirt off over his head, and the room erupts.

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CHAPTER 29

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STELLA

My second glass of bourbon is nothing but ice when Adam finds me. I'm sequestered in a corner, my belly warm and my fingers tingling, watching various people claim the men they've won for the evening. I see Adam coming long before he gets to me.

"Having a good time?" he asks, raising an eyebrow in the direction of my glass.

I let it dangle from my fingertips, feeling bold. "I don't know. I got asked on a date, and now my date is about to leave with someone prettier."

His eyes go wide, and a bright red blush rises up along his neck. "This isn't a—she isn't—"

I bend and set my empty glass down on a nearby mat. "Relax. I'm joking."

He lets out a heavy sigh, and I smile because I feel certain that whatever I'm feeling right now, whatever I've been trying to ignore for the last who knows how long? He feels it, too.

"I'm just sorry I couldn't afford to bid on you."

His eyes travel up to mine, and it's only then that I realize he's been staring at my mouth. "You would have bid on me?"

I'm feeling courageous, feeling light-headed, feeling suddenly like the world isn't so bad after all. "I would have bid a million dollars to make sure I was the only one leaving here with you."

He looks like he swallowed his tongue, and I hope he can see that I'm not joking anymore. I want to feel his hands on me. If I thought every dollar in my bank account would have accomplished that, it would all be his.

His pale cheeks flush, and when his mouth finally opens in response, someone behind me says, "You ready to go, handsome?"

I turn to find Adam's beautiful bidder. She of the perfect make-up and waist-high slit. Her eyes slide to me, and Adam starts to sputter. "Stella, I'm sorry, I've got to go."

When I turn back to him, he looks like someone who's been told their goldfish is dead. "Of course," I say as cheerfully as I can manage. "She did pay, after all."

Adam's eyebrows pucker in, and his jaw muscles protrude from his cheek in an obvious expression of annoyance. But all he says is, "Yeah."

This is the part where I'm supposed to turn and walk away, where I leave this beautiful man to this beautiful woman and go back to my silent, empty home. But I feel stuck here, like someone has handcuffed me to Adam, and to walk away now, I'll have to chew my own arm off.

But then the woman who bought Adam steps up next to him and smiles a friendly smile at me. "Do you need a ride home?" she asks.

It's not even something I considered. I'm definitely far beyond the limit of being able to drive, but there's absolutely no way that I'm getting into a car with Adam and his date. That idea alone is all I need to finally take a step back, putting distance between Adam and me.

"No, thanks. I'll get an Uber."

"Stella, come on. We'll take you home," Adam insists, reaching toward me.

"Adam," I snap, without meaning to.

He stops, his hand dropping to his side, and I'm out in the parking lot before I can stop myself. I call an Uber and sit in

my car while I wait for it, and from the darkness of my front seat, I watch Adam get into his truck, the beautiful woman in tow, and the two of them drive off.

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CHAPTER 30

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ADAM

Sitting across from Jennifer at a bar in Hanover, all I can think about is Stella. Something is different. I don't know what, but the way she looked at me like I'd just knocked her down, it was something. And that comment about bidding on me. What the hell did that mean?

“Hey, handsome, you still with me?”

My eyes focus again on Jennifer. She's beautiful, all smooth skin and full, red lips, but she might as well be a basset hound for all the interest I have in her.

“Sorry,” I mutter.

“Still thinking about that girl from the gym?”

I spin my empty beer mug around, settling it between my fingers again. I'm not surprised she knows I'm thinking about Stella. I can only imagine what she made of the weird interaction she witnessed between us.

“It's complicated. I apologize. I don't mean to be distracted.”

Jennifer leans back in her seat and sucks on her bottom lip. The gesture is sexy, and I wonder if it's natural or something she's rehearsed. “That's okay. The second I saw the way you were looking at her, I knew I wasn't going to catch your eye. I thought for twelve hundred dollars, I'd at least get a second date.”

I look down at the table, feeling like a guilty child. “Sorry. I guess I have a little bit of a crush.”

She smiles, a maternal sort of thing, and for the first time, I wonder how old she is. She's definitely older than me. "I would guess you're not the only one."

I look straight at her, at her dark eyes, one of them half-hidden by her mane of raven hair. "What do you mean?"

Her eyebrows shoot up. "Oh, honey. You don't get that worked up over a harmless little auction unless you're jealous."

I don't know what to say. It never occurred to me that Stella might be jealous. She was drunk, that I could tell, so I assumed she was upset because she didn't want me treating her like she was helpless. But jealous?

Jennifer taps her manicured nails on the table between us. "For such a hottie, you're not too self-aware, are you? I don't know what's going on between you and that gorgeous girl, but I would bet my bank account that she thought she was going home with you tonight."

That can't be true. It can't be. It's not like I said tonight was a date. And we agreed to keep it professional. Why would she think—

"I bet she's still up, drinking away the thought of you."

My stomach goes tight the way it does when a sense of urgency settles in my blood. I want her, and I want her now.

"I'm sorry," I say, already halfway out of my seat.

"No worries, hot stuff. I got my money's worth." She sends me a kind grin, and I take the time to leave enough cash on the table for our drinks before I rush out of the bar.

CHAPTER 31

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STELLA

If Abby was here, she would tell me no man is worth sitting home on a Saturday night, sulking. But Abby isn't here.

She's on her way back from Tahoe, and I'm here alone, trying to stop thinking about Adam and that woman and what they're doing right now. But it's hard to stop thinking about him when the evidence of him is everywhere. The paint cans and the tools and the fact that my futon is pushed against my window, covered in a sheet, instead of sitting in the center of the room, like it always is.

My blood is still buzzing a little, but I honestly wish I had thought to stop for a bottle of bottom-shelf vodka on my way home. What am I so upset about? If there was never a chance that anything was going to happen between us, then why is my skin crawling as if I'm sitting here being cheated on? I groan and put one of my couch cushions over my face. Maybe it'll put me out of my misery.

A knock sounds at the door.

I whip the pillow away and look at the clock on my stove. It's only a little after eleven, which is way too early for Abby to be back. And she would be too tired to come by anyway. I rush to the door, my heart pounding at all the possibilities.

But when I open it, it's not the police, like I've half-convinced myself it will be. It's Adam, and he's breathing like he ran here from the other side of Baltimore.

My adrenaline spikes at the sight of him, my heart pounding in my ears and my hands starting to tremble.

“Adam? Did you forget something that you—?”

The question doesn't make it out of my mouth because Adam has taken one large step into my condo and swooped down to press his mouth to mine.

Every first kiss I've ever had—even with Mickey—has always been a slow, gradual thing. Like lighting a candle and then using the candle to light the fireplace. But with Adam, there's no gradual climb into inescapable heat. He puts his mouth on mine, and the world goes up in flames.

I gasp, and it's like Adam wants to own every part of me. His tongue is in my mouth, his hands are in my hair, and he's pushing me back into my condo so fast that I almost stumble. He rips away from me, bends down, wraps each of his big hands around both of my thighs, and hoists me up.

Something like a whimper escapes me when my hips settle against his, and then I'm lost. Lost in the taste of him and the brush of his tongue and the pull of his lips and what it's all doing to my body. I'm half-aware as he kicks my door shut and then presses me against it. I grab at him, holding his face and then sliding my hands up to his hair to tug on it as I kiss him. How long have I wanted to do this? How long have I told myself I was just horny and that it had nothing to do with Adam himself?

He groans into my mouth, and the sound is such a fucking turn-on that I grind my pelvis against his, feeling him grow beneath his jeans even as I go wet and slippery between my legs. The pajama pants I changed into are so thin, I can feel everything. One of his hands comes up slowly to cup my breast, fingers running along my nipple over and over until I reach up to tear at my clothes. I want his hands on my bare skin, his mouth too. I don't manage to get my shirt off.

“Wait,” he says against my lips, and then he's taking those lips, red and swollen and sloppy, away from me. “Wait, wait, wait,” he says again, and my fingers stop moving.

“What's wrong?” finally slips from my swollen mouth.

He sighs, but he's still holding me against the door, his hard length pressed between my thighs. "Listen, I..." He looks away from me, down at where our zippers are pressed together, and his jaw goes tight. Like he's conducting an experiment, he bucks his hips against mine, and I claw at him. Holy God, he's so hard, and I want him inside me so bad.

"What is it?" I whine, wanting him to spit it out so we can get back to the part where he's going to fuck me against this door.

"I'm not very experienced." The words seem to tumble out of him with his eyes still down, looking everywhere but at me.

My body cools a little. "Okay..." I say. I'm holding onto his arms, feeling the strain of his muscles as he holds onto me. "That's okay." I don't care whether or not he's experienced, as long as he wants to do this with me. I am, however, surprised. Adam is so sexy. He's over six feet, has kind eyes, a magnificent laugh, and muscles the size of my head. Am I supposed to believe that women aren't literally begging to be fucked by him? Seems unlikely.

Adam repositions, his hands going to my ass to hike me higher, and his cock bumps against my clit. I gasp, trying hard to focus on the discussion at hand but feeling a little like I'm going to shake into a million pieces.

"I was with one woman for a long time," he chokes out, his eyes on my chest, where my nipples are standing up tight behind my shirt. No bra. "We were high school sweethearts, and we lost our virginites together. She dumped me while I was overseas, and since then, there's only been one other person, in the back seat of my truck. It wasn't exactly a transformative experience."

I grab his face in both hands and make his blue eyes meet mine. "Adam, do you want to have sex with me?"

His cheeks go pink, and he nods.

"Okay then."

I expect him to come back to me, to press his mouth to mine and let his nerves or insecurities vanish, but instead, his

mouth twists with worry and he says, “I want to make you scream. But I might need a little help.”

I don’t know the right thing to say, the exact wording so that he knows how perfect everything he just said was. And how perfect the way he’s looking at me is, with this question in his eyes like I might change my mind now that I know all of this about him.

I lean forward and take his mouth. His arms go like steel around me, and he pulls me away from the door, marching a few feet to the kitchen island and setting me down there.

“So, about the *keeping it professional* stuff,” I say as he kisses and licks his way down my neck, sucking lightly at the hollow of my throat.

He pulls back, his eyes no longer the light blue of a summer sky but the dark blue of stormy midnight. One corner of his mouth lifts up. “You want me to stop?”

I tug at the hem of his shirt, slipping my hands underneath to touch the warm skin of his muscular belly. I scrape my nails down to his belt buckle and watch him shiver. “If you stop, I might burst.”

He smirks, the cockiest expression I’ve ever seen on his face, and then yanks his shirt off over his head.

“Holy shit,” I breathe. “You’re so fucking beautiful.” I saw him with his shirt off the night I stayed at his place, but it was dark and I was much more concerned with calming him down than getting a good look at him. I’m getting a good look now, all muscle and hair and a Marines tattoo on his left bicep. His dog tags dangle below his throat.

He pulls me to the edge of the island, and his head dips low as he pushes up my shirt and swipes his tongue across my nipple. It goes almost painfully hard, and a wrinkle appears between Adam’s eyebrows, like he’s studying for a test, and then he leans forward and does it again. “Is this okay?” he asks around my wet, puckered skin.

“Suck,” I whisper, and his eyes go black before he attaches his mouth to my breast and pulls at it hard with his lips.

“Fuck,” I shout and grip the edges of the counter. This seems to excite Adam even more, and he groans as he moves to the other breast, exposing it to the cold air before pushing it up with one of his huge hands and giving it the same treatment.

My chest looks like a strawberry patch, all flushed with desire, and I’ve got my hands buried in his hair when I say, “Will you put your mouth on me?” Maybe it’s too soon to ask. This is all going really fast, but I feel like we’ve had weeks of foreplay, so much time to get worked up over each other, and having his mouth everywhere but the spot between my legs that is positively weeping with need is killing me.

I track the moment it takes for him to figure out what I mean before he lets go of my nipple with a wet *pop* and says, “It would be my genuine pleasure.”

This whole time, he’s been bent at a ninety-degree angle to get to me, but now he drops to his knees, and I whimper just watching him. He helps me shimmy out of my pants and then runs his big, calloused hands up my thighs to grip my underwear and slide it down my legs.

“God,” he whispers. “You are...” He never finishes his sentence, but it’s entirely unnecessary because a moment later, his tongue swipes up the center of me, and my back hits the counter. “Good?” he asks, but I can’t respond, can only grab a fistful of his hair and guide him back to where I want him.

He licks a stripe across my skin a few times and then he stops. When I look down at him, feeling desperate and achy, he’s looking at the space between my legs like it’s a painting in a gallery to be examined and interpreted. His eyes meet mine, and he settles one big finger right over my clit. “Right here?”

I’m panting, and when I nod, he spreads my lips with his fingers, hesitates, and then closes his mouth over my clit. He gives it a hard suck the way he did my nipple, and I jerk.

“Wait,” I say, squirming away. His confused eyes find mine, and he sits back on his heels, like he might never touch me again if I tell him right now that I want to stop. I give him

a reassuring smile. “It’s just a bit much,” I say gently. “Tongue first.”

He nods and waits for me to spread my legs again. I wonder, briefly, about the other person he was with for so long, if he ever did this for her, if all the knowledge he has of sexual technique is all tailored to her enjoyment. The thought is almost enough to make me move away from him again, but then his hands slide up my thighs and settle on my bare hips, and the weight and warmth of him there is so good, so comforting and intimate, that I sigh as he puts his mouth back on me.

He sets a rhythm against my clit, half obvious intuition and half response to the canting of my hips, which I try so hard to stop, but everything about Adam is so good. One of my hands tangles in his hair and the other entwines with his, resting on my stomach, and the constant reminder that it’s him, that he’s here with me, has me clenching my teeth.

After a few minutes, when the simple pleasure of his touch stops being enough and my need to come takes over, I take the hand curled around mine and lead it down to where his mouth has swooped down to taste me at my entrance. He takes instruction well, driving two long fingers into me, forcing the breath right out of me.

“Oh, fuck,” I shout, and then grab him with both hands in his hair, meet his dewy blue eyes, and say, “Suck. Now, suck.”

Without looking away from me, he closes his mouth around my clit and sucks hard, and I come with a cry up at the ceiling, eyes slamming closed. And he doesn’t stop. Not until my limbs go heavy and I’m gasping for air against the countertop.

On his knees, Adam grins up at me. He swipes a hand across his wet chin and says, “How was that?”

CHAPTER 32

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ADAM

It wasn't exactly a scream, but when Stella came, her whole body went tight and she made this sound like she'd just fallen and was ready to hit the ground. It was so fucking sexy, but now that it's over, I'm feeling self-conscious again, wondering if it was as good for her as it was for me. I *need* it to be good for her.

Suzie hated oral. The first time I went down on her, we were teenagers, experimenting with all the things our friends had already done. She said she hated that it was so messy and always refused when I offered. And anytime I gathered the courage to ask her to go down on me, it was always just for a minute, just long enough for me to get unbearably hard so that we could fuck.

So, this? With Stella? It's new, and it's incredible, and I want to be so good at it that she never says no, that she begs me for it.

As soon as she's stopped trembling, I stand. Stella launches herself off the edge of the counter, wrapping her naked limbs around me, and I grunt when all her wetness settles against the zipper of my jeans. I want inside her so bad, especially now that I know the taste of her. I want to know if she'll come harder, shout louder, with me inside her.

She kisses me, swiping her tongue into my mouth before saying against my lips, "It was perfect. Now, it's my turn."

Before I can get an answer out, she's dropping to her knees in front of me and undoing the button on my jeans. When she

slides down the zipper, my cock springs free, red at the tip and so hard it's almost embarrassing.

She stares at it, eyes wide, her breath sawing out of her. Her gaze finally slides up to mine. "Just to be clear, there's no way I can swallow that whole thing."

At the word *swallow*, my cock jumps, desperate. I take her face in my hands and bend down to kiss her, and by the time I pull away, she's got a hand on each of my biceps. She uses them to push off of me, to make me straighten so she can get to my dick, sticking straight out, ready to greet her.

And when she wraps her lips around the tip of it, I have to throw my head back because the sight and feel of her at the same time is almost enough to make me explode right then and there. Whatever guidance I needed, Stella doesn't seem to need any. She knows exactly what she's doing when she slides one fist up my shaft and swirls her tongue around the head.

Stella is already the best I've ever had, and she's been going at me for all of thirty seconds. Like some kind of succubus, she holds my eyes as she proceeds to take a truly impressive amount of me into her mouth, pushing me into the back of her throat, until she comes off me with a little cough. I want to tell her she doesn't have to do all that, but it also feels so incredible, I can't bring myself to say it.

She goes deep again, and when I hiss, she somehow smiles around me. In that moment, I swear I'm so far gone it might kill me. And then she goes to town on me, sucking me like I'm the greatest thing she's ever tasted, humming in the back of her throat until that familiar zing starts low in my belly.

"Wait, hang on," I say, taking her jaw in my hand as gently as I can and trying to lead her away, even as I fight not to finish. She lifts off of me, a question in her eyes, but she keeps stroking me slowly, wet and slippery. "I don't want to come in your mouth."

Her face doesn't change at first, and then, all of a sudden, she grins wide, her eyes sparkling. "Don't want to? Or feel like you shouldn't?"

I blink at her, stuttering out an answer, something to the tune of, “I didn’t think women liked that sort of thing,” and she seems to take that as an answer. She wraps her lips around me and slides down until I bump the back of her throat again. I come, straight into her warmth. I don’t realize I have a grip on her hair until I’m done, and she pulls away from me, the silky strands slipping between my fingers. I’ve never come in a woman’s mouth before, and it’s the sexiest fucking thing that’s ever happened to me.

I’m half-slumped, half-naked in the middle of her living room, her furniture all pushed out of the way, and a can of paint just feet from us. I just engaged in oral sex with Stella Hart, even though I said I wouldn’t. And it was incredible.

While I’m still recovering, she crawls up my body, completely bare, and I want to worship her, but I feel like my body is made of rubber.

“Did you like it?” she asks when we’re face to face.

I don’t know if she’s referring to giving oral or receiving it, but either way, the answer is yes, so I nod. “And I like you.”

She blushes and bites her lip, like I didn’t illustrate how much I like her by coming down her throat. “Stay the night,” she says, and it’s not a question so I don’t give her an answer. I shimmy out of my jeans on our way to the bedroom.

And then we’re in her bed, the one I’ve been looking at all week, fantasizing about ravishing her in, and we snuggle down under the blanket that smells like her, like what I know her skin will smell like in the morning.

When we’re settled, with her head on my chest, all of her warm skin pressed up against me, she says, “I guess your date was unsuccessful?”

I laugh against her hair. “Dates tend not to go well when you’re busy thinking about someone else.”

I can feel her eyes on me, looking up at me through all that hair. “Was she mad?”

I think of Jennifer and the amused pull of her mouth as she watched me. “She convinced me to come here.”

“I’m glad she did,” Stella says in a sleepy voice, and I let myself hold her a little tighter as she falls asleep.

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CHAPTER 33

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ADAM

Stella is quiet on the ride to Berserkr, with this tense look on her face that's been glued there since we woke up this morning. We're going back to get her car, but part of me is hoping she'll stay with me while I'm there. I've got some work to do for Ford, and I feel completely unable to leave her side.

But when the job is over, when I'm done with Stella's condo, what happens to Stella and me? Are we done being in each other's lives? Was what happened last night a one-time deal? I glance over at her again, and I wonder if she's thinking the same thing, if that's why her forehead is all wrinkled in thought like that. Or maybe she's not thinking about it at all.

When we get to Berserkr, Ford and Dani are waiting for us outside. I texted them when we left Stella's in hopes that one or both of them would be available to show Stella around the place, but I wasn't prepared for a welcoming committee, and from the look on Stella's face, she wasn't either.

"I'm really sorry about both of them," is all I manage to get out as we cross the sun-hot street and Ford throws his arm over her shoulders, yanking her from my side. Dani twines one of her arms through Stella's. They surround her like a blanket, and I'm left standing on the sidewalk as they usher her inside.

I follow them in and let Dani steal Stella away, but if she's at all bothered at the idea of being separated from me, she doesn't show it. I watch her as they go. Her eyes are wide with wonder as she takes in everything Dani is showing her, like she's being walked through Buckingham Palace. She's so

beautiful, all that hair and all that soft skin, all of it that I know the feel of now.

“Adam.” I have no clue how long Ford has been standing right beside me, trying to get my attention, but I can only imagine it’s been a little while from the cocky smirk on his face. He nods toward the men’s locker room, and I follow him, checking over my shoulder to make sure Stella is okay. Dani can be a little intimidating, to men and women alike, but Stella is laughing at something she’s said, her head thrown all the way back.

I mourn the loss of her when we step into the locker room and Ford leads me over to the sink he’s having trouble with.

While I try to diagnose it, Ford stands over me with his arms crossed. “And put me on your calendar when you’re done with Stella’s place. I’ve got to get the new bags installed and part of the floor redone. If you learned how to re-canvas the ring, I could pay you to do that, too.”

I scoff. “That’s a lot of work for one guy.”

Ford shrugs. “Hire someone. You’re going to need a team soon.”

I know he’s right, but until now, I’ve been able to do it all myself. It seems almost indulgent to even consider hiring anyone.

“I’ll give you Dani,” Ford jokes.

“And put up with that attitude all day long? No, thanks.”

Ford said the sink had low water pressure, and when I turn the faucet, almost nothing trickles out. I toss a rag down to cover the drain and unscrew the faucet head to clean the aerator. Ford takes a seat on a bench beside me as men wander in and out, stopping to glance at us before moving on.

“How are things with the pretty woman?” he asks.

“You know, you don’t have to stay. I work better in the quiet.”

Ford ignores my quip. “I’m assuming things have progressed, seeing as how you brought her in, in your truck,

very early in the morning. I'm guessing the guilt has stopped eating at you."

I scrub out the aerator with a brush I brought with me, glad for something to focus on so that I don't have to look at Ford. "I suppose it's a different kind of guilt these days." When the aerator is clean, I put it back in place and try the water again, but the pressure is still nothing but dribbles.

"And what's the guilt these days?"

I lean against the sink and look over at him. I've barely been able to let myself think the words that are about to come out of my mouth, things I've been shoving down to the very depths over the last few weeks. "I'm never going to be able to give her the life that Mickey did."

Ford makes a sputtering sound and rolls his eyes. "And have you even once asked her if that's the kind of life she wants?"

I throw my hands up and bend down under the sink, taking a look at the pipes, but they're a blur, one giant, silver blob in my conflicted vision. "She's struggling financially, and it's killing her. I want to be able to give her everything, but I'm not in a position to offer her much at all."

"Listen, mate—"

I reach out and twist the water supply valve. Water sputters loud through the open pipes and floods out of the faucet. I straighten up and turn the sink off, setting my hands on my hips and looking over at Ford.

He grumbles something about kids playing around in the locker room and then stands, putting one giant hand on my shoulder. "You're trying to save her again. I don't think that's what she wants from you. Maybe I'm wrong, but I sincerely doubt it."

I hate to admit it, but Ford has far more experience with women than I do. He's probably right, but all I can think about is Mickey's condo, the way she was happy to not be working while Mickey took care of things. I think of the way she broke

down the other day, how desperate she is for stability. I want to be the one to give that to her.

We head back out to the gym, where we find Dani and Stella in a corner, on a mat, standing side by side, throwing punches. Stella has taken off the light sweater she came in, her arms taking on an unbelievable shape as she follows Dani's instruction on how to throw a jab. I've never wanted anyone or anything as bad as I want Stella. I try to keep out of sight as Ford and I get closer to the women, my blood pumping hard now, the conversation in the locker room forgotten.

Dani comes up behind Stella, puts her hands on her hips, and shows her how to rotate as she throws a cross-jab. Every muscle in Stella's legs, covered only in tight leggings, flexes, and the sight shoots straight down to my cock. An image appears in my mind, quick and hot, Stella bent over, her calves and thighs tight with tension as I rock into her from behind. A fantasy I've had what feels like a million times.

"You're drooling," Ford whispers in my ear.

"Think it's too soon to propose?" I whisper back without taking my eyes off Stella.

Ford chuckles. "Wait until after dinner, at least."

Stella finally spots us, and her arms drop to her side. She immediately crosses them behind her back, like a child who's been told not to touch anything.

"Please don't stop on my account," I tell her, switching places with Dani so that I'm standing behind Stella. Ford and Dani wisely vanish, and I step up close enough to Stella to feel the heat radiating off of her. She's been working hard. Without thinking, I grab onto her hips.

She sucks in a little gasp, and I feel a spark of triumph inside my chest. She's as aware of my body as I am of hers, and I give a little glance around the gym to make sure no one is watching us too closely before I take one more small step forward and press my hips to her ass. I slide my hands up until they're resting on her stomach and say in her ear, "Try to focus. When you're in a fight, a real one, there's so much

going on around you. It's loud and there are people shouting, and all the adrenaline is rushing through your body, and if you don't keep your brain clear, you'll freeze up."

I know Stella isn't here because she wants to fight, but I imagine her training, all of her muscles solid and covered in sweat, wearing as little clothing as she can get away with, and my dick gets hard against her curves.

She makes a little sound in the back of her throat, not quite a moan, something more socially aware, and I grind myself against her. I lean forward and watch the way she clenches her jaw tight as I position her legs in a more solid stance.

"You have to anchor yourself to the ground or one good swing is going to throw you right off balance. Tighten your core. Your power is here." I press a hand to her abdomen, splaying my fingers so that my pinky disappears beneath the waistband of her leggings.

She sways. "I thought you didn't have much experience with women," she breathes out, her head dropping back against my shoulder. She's given up all pretext now.

"I don't. I'm just touching you the way I want to."

"Take me home. Now."

Spinning her around, I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder, ignoring the way every head in the gym turns to us when she shrieks in delight. I march us right past Ford and Dani, giving them a small wave as Stella giggles down by my side.

"Call me about the bags and the floor," I shout to Ford and then throw open the door.

CHAPTER 34

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STELLA

I'm just a vibrating nerve as I drive back to my place with Adam following behind me. I feel exhilarated. I feel like someone who's just been told that dessert exists. My arms are sore and my legs a little gelatinous, and it's incredible. And it's not just Adam. Having him basically dry hump me in front of a room full of people was definitely an experience I didn't know I needed, but it's more than that. Dani and her fists and the way she taught me how to have the tiniest slice of the confidence she has was amazing.

When we pull up in front of my condo, I hop out of my car, and before Adam can get out of his, I swing into the passenger seat and close us in. Adam looks over at me with a smile in his eyes, like he can tell that I'm positively vibrating from the inside out. "You liked it?"

I nod enthusiastically. "It was great. Dani is so badass."

"So are you."

He sounds so confident when he says it, but there must be doubt written all over my face because when he looks over at me, his smile fades. "Anyone who spends five minutes with you can see it. Dani can see it. Why do you think she's all over you like that?"

"Sure, but Dani doesn't know me."

Adam taps his thumbs on the wheel in a nervous gesture. "Do I?" he asks. He turns off the truck, and when I think he'll put distance between us, he does the opposite, reaching across the console to set his hand over mine.

We sit in silence for a minute, neither of us making a move to get out. “I think so,” I finally say.

One corner of his mouth tilts up. His thumb, almost twice the size of my own, strokes over the back of my hand. With the sun shining right into the truck, his eyes look impossibly blue. “You amaze me, Stella.”

I blink at him. I know he’s a nice guy, and he wants to say nice things, but... “I want to earn that, but I don’t know how.” The words come out sounding so small. It’s how I’ve always felt my whole life, like I couldn’t find a place that I worked hard enough to get into. That everyone else has it all figured out and I’m just here, trying to learn how to maneuver through life with my own two feet.

Adam’s expression is severe. “Stella, you don’t have to *earn* anything.”

I feel it like someone has reached into my chest and wrung out my heart like a wet towel. In seconds, I’m scrambling across the console to get to him. He helps me, grabbing onto my hips and hoisting me over, until I’m fully seated on top of him, and our mouths crash together.

I moan into his mouth, and down where we’re pressed together, I can feel him going hard again, getting thicker and thicker until I can’t keep myself from rocking against him, sighing again and again into his waiting mouth. His hands curl around my hips, and he guides me, pushing up between my legs, creating a friction between us that’s almost unbearable. I’m practically bouncing on him now, halfway shouting into his mouth as the truck rocks around us.

“I need you inside me,” I pull far enough away to say. He grunts in the back of his throat. His fingers are between us, tugging at the fabric of my yoga pants, and for a second, I think he wants to do it right here, in the parking lot of my condo, like my bed isn’t a short walk away, but then, like he can read my thoughts, he says, “I just need to feel how wet you are.”

A surprised little *oh* slips out of my mouth as his fingers slip over my bare skin, almost embarrassingly wet, and I can

tell from the far-off look in his eyes and the erratic way his fingers feel all over my lips and core that he's not trying to give me pleasure. This, this frenzied touching, it's all for him.

He slips his hand back out. "Let's go. Now. Right now."

I can barely contain my giggle as he fumbles open the door and we almost fall out of the truck. But then he slides out, taking me with him, and I'm in his arms, completely wrapped around his body.

"Don't drop me," I laugh against his mouth as we make our way up to my door.

"Never," he says back, and then we're inside, stumbling through my messy living room and into my messy bedroom, the bed still pushed to the center of the room.

He drops me down onto it, and I'm going for his belt buckle before I've fully settled on the mattress. Adam presses his fists to the mattress on either side of my hips, bends over until we're eye to eye, and says, "You have no idea how many times I've thought about fucking you in this bed."

My whole body goes hot, from the tips of my ears to my kneecaps. I've never felt this specific brand of want, a want so urgent that I feel like I'll wiggle right out of my skin if he doesn't hurry.

"Do it then," I say, trying to hold back the whine in my voice, trying to sound confident and in control, but the nervous, unsure Adam from last night is gone, and this Adam seems to understand now how much my body wants him, how much his touch affects me.

He lunges at me, covering my body with his and pushing my legs apart to make room for his broad form. His hands have started to find their way under my clothes, beneath the hem of my shirt and down past the waistband of my pants. When we're both naked, pressed together, already sweating from just the contact, Adam meets my eye, and asks, "Condom?"

I shake my head. "Only if you want to. I've got an IUD. And I got tested after Mickey." I don't think I need to ask him

about possible STIs, as I'm pretty sure it's been a little while for him, but he offers the information anyway.

He pushes off me and settles back on his heels on the mattress. "I was tested, too. After the last time." I nod, but he's not looking at me. His head is bowed, his breathing heavy, and it's almost comical, the way his cock is jutting straight out, all red and swollen between us. He looks up at me from under his lashes, his eyes full of heat. "Tell me what you like."

I can hear my heart pounding in my ears. I want to tell him that he can do whatever he wants with me, but I can see on his face that he wants guidance, that he wants specifics on how to please me. So, I cant my hips forward, smiling when his eyes drop to the space between my legs, and say, "I like it a little rough."

His pupils have gone completely dark, and there's a tic in his jaw where he's biting down hard. He swallows loudly. "How rough?"

I smile and come up on my knees in front of him, taking his face in my hands. "I don't need you to choke me or hit me or anything. At least not yet." His eyes go wide, and I laugh as I take his hands and put them on my ribs, right under the curves of my bare breasts. "I just want you to show me that I'm yours. Make sure I know it."

He makes a helpless little noise, and then I'm on my back and he's on top of me. Pushing my arms up above my head, he holds my wrists to the mattress, bowing me up against his hard body. Leaning down, he presses his mouth to my ear and says, "You want me to own you, Stella?"

I go up in flames. I squirm beneath him, trying to get my legs open so that he can be inside me already. Holding both of my wrists with one hand, he reaches down and grabs the flesh of my thigh in his hand. I pray that he bruises me. I want to wake up tomorrow with his fingerprints on me.

"Please," I whisper, desperation settling in the pit of my stomach. I feel empty, achy, swollen, and slippery. Adam opens his mouth against my throat and as he sucks a patch of my skin into his mouth, he pushes inside me.

My eyes roll back in my head. I knew, of course, that Adam was big, but there's a difference between having that length in my mouth and having it between my legs. The full, stretched feeling I get when he's fully seated inside me makes me euphoric. But then he doesn't move. He holds himself still inside me, his breath puffing into my ear.

"Adam," I say. "Adam, move." The words come out much more demanding than I intend, but can he not see that I'm dying?

"If I move," he breathes into my ear, "I'll come."

I emit something that sounds suspiciously like a howl and claw at his back. He must have let my hands go when he pushed his way into me, but I don't remember it.

"Please, please, please," I find myself chanting, and then the words catch in my throat when he grabs hold of my wrists, eyes unfocused, and pins them to the mattress again.

"Wait until I'm ready," he growls, and we both feel it, the way my pussy tightens on him, the way his words just brought me so close to orgasm, I've stopped breathing.

"Dammit," he says, pulling out of me. He flips me over onto my stomach, yanks my hips up into the air, and thrusts back into me. I groan loud up at my headboard, and then he's going at me so hard that our hips slap together. The sound alone drives me wild. I press my face into my pillow and scream as he fucks me, gripping me so tightly around my waist that it hurts. I fucking love it. I don't realize I'm shouting his name into the pillow until he's right there, his body covering mine from behind. He's so deep that every thrust makes me shiver.

"I'm right here," he says, his words so soft compared to the way he's gripping me for dear life. He rests his head on my shoulder, and, so quietly I almost can't hear him, he says, "I'm not going anywhere."

Something in the way he says it, so gentle and so matter-of-fact at the same time, sets me off like a rocket. I choke out a sob and clench down so hard on him that I see stars. As soon

as I start to come, he pushes his hips hard into mine, deep and rough, and spills inside me.

When I come back into my body, his weight on top of me is overwhelming and extremely comforting. “God,” he groans and rolls off me, settling onto the mattress. He’s huffing, as out of breath as I am. He presses his face into my pillow and says, “I...didn’t know I was going to like that so much.”

I giggle, feeling the endorphins rush through me. “Maybe being rough is what’s been missing all along.” I might be totally off-base, but I get the feeling he and his ex-girlfriend weren’t doing anything like what we just did with each other.

Adam opens one heavy-lidded eye and looks over at me. “You’re what’s been missing all along.”

My heart gives one hard, heavy thump.

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CHAPTER 35

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ADAM

The nightmares are always the same. It's a sunny day, the kind of day where the sun is so bright that it looks like a blinding white ray coming directly at you, and while we're in the middle of an ongoing soccer tournament, there's an explosion.

In the dream, everyone dies.

In reality, only half of them did.

I stand in the center of the site, tents blown to hell all around me, only half dressed because it's such a goddamn hot day, and there at my feet, Ford, Dani, Christian: all of them bleeding from their stomachs and their necks and their heads.

And in every dream, I start screaming. I scream as their blood seeps down through the hard dirt under my feet, all the way to my shoes, until it's soaking into the leather. I scream as more bombs fall, as they keep falling, never seeming to hit me, always hitting everyone else, until my friends' bodies have become nothing but limbs and fingers and hair, and eventually the bombs aren't even bombs anymore. They're comets, but ones with blazing, orange tails, crashing into the world around me and taking it apart, piece by piece.

Eventually a comet will get me. They're huge, after all, and aimed right at me.

And when it hits, that's when I wake up. Always covered in sweat that feels like blood, always in the dark, the black of it so shocking after staring directly at the white-hot sun,

always hoarse from all the screaming that happened in real life like it did in the dream.

But tonight, I don't make it to the comets. I've barely made it past the first explosion before something is dragging me up out of sleep. I process her words first, coming in that gentle, soothing tone of hers, calling me out of the depths until I've opened my eyes into the darkness, only to find her leaning over me, her red hair falling down around us like drapery.

"Adam," she says, her hands on either side of my face. "Adam, it's okay. You were dreaming. It was just a dream."

She's right and she's wrong, but it doesn't matter because her warmth is wrapped around me, pressed up against me from waist to shoulder. All I can do is lie here and let her hold me, let her comfort me, let her whisper things in my ear about how I'm not alone and how I never have to do any of that again.

And eventually, I reach up to pry her off of me until I can look her right in the eye. Even though I know it's impossible, I feel like I can still see the green of her irises in the dark, looking back at me from a face that's creased with worry and concern.

"You're really here," I say because a part of me is convinced that this is some new part of the dream, and that any minute, Stella will be gone, too, that a comet will swoop in and take her away, and I'll be left with nothing but the feel of her lingering in my arms.

She nods. "I'm really here."

There were so many nights when she wasn't, nights when I would wake up from the nightmares and it would feel like I was missing her without even knowing her, like someone had taken a piece from a puzzle, right from the very center. But that never made sense. It was like having phantom pains of a fifth limb.

But now, now Stella really is here. This is really her voice, and those are really her eyes, and this is really her hair, I tell myself as I run my fingers through it, so soft that I almost can't even believe it.

“Was I—”

“You were shouting,” she whispers, leaning in to place a kiss right at the corner of my mouth. “You sounded so scared.” I can hear the thickness in her voice, like she might cry. I don’t want her to cry.

“I’m sorry. I never should have let you—”

“Why are you sorry?” She nuzzles into the soft skin of my neck. “Is it something you have control over?”

“No.”

“Then don’t apologize. Just let me be here with you.” She wraps her arms around my neck, pressing her warm, naked chest against mine, and even though this is the absolute worst time, I feel my cock starting to harden between us.

She gives a little wiggle against me and sighs. She’s getting wet. I can feel the slide of it along the length of me. She starts to pull away. “We probably shouldn’t—”

I cut her off with my mouth, taking her little waist in my hands and lifting her so I can lower her onto my cock. She whimpers, high-pitched and desperate, and we go slow. I let her set the pace, lifting up off me and then lowering down in this patient, indulgent rhythm. Neither of us is in a hurry, and I wait until she starts to sob before I start to move faster, pushing us both over the edge.

When we’ve quieted, I don’t pull out of her. We lay like that until I eventually fall asleep with the weight of her on top of me and dream about nothing.

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CHAPTER 36

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STELLA

A week later, I have an appointment at Berserkr with Dani. I almost decide not to go, but when I posed the possibility to Abby, she gave me a look that could bend steel.

“You have a duty to me,” she said. “A duty to be the baddest bitch that you can be. You absolutely cannot cancel that appointment.”

And Dani doesn't even go easy on me, which is amazing. She shows me some of the same moves that she did the last time I was here, how to jab and how to twist my body correctly when I throw a cross punch. But this time she shows me how to do a proper uppercut and how to position my body in the right way so that when I kick, I don't lose my balance.

She's starting to show me how to move, ducking and weaving and circling on the balls of my feet, when I get out of breath. I've always been good at cardio, but this is different. I forget to breathe when I'm focusing on jabbing and kicking, and now that we're bouncing around like boxers, I'm completely winded.

“Okay, break time,” Dani says, and we sit there on the mat for a long moment, watching as other people have sessions with their coaches or use the bags and vinyl mannequins for their own means. In the ring, Ford is sparring with a guy, the two of them moving so fast that I can't even begin to understand how they can anticipate each other's moves.

I sigh. “I just want to be stronger.”

Dani looks over at me with just her eyes, her head still bowed slightly and her arms resting over her knees. “Strength isn’t just about training.” She looks up at the ring with me, her eyes following Ford and the other guy. “Strength is also about will. It’s about your ability to keep pushing.” She sets her head back against the wall, still watching the men. “My dad was a fighter. He had this underground ring and sometimes he would take me to watch the matches. I would hide in the shadows and no one would see.”

Her eyes are glazed now, like she’s looking behind the walls of Berserkr into some other world. “But he fought with some very dangerous people, and when I was thirteen, I came home from school to find him with a bullet in his head. I’m certain if I had come home five minutes earlier, I would have been dead, too.”

Everything in me has gone quiet, like every cell in my body is trying to listen to Dani’s story. But my mouth has to move. “My God. I’m so sorry.” I look over at Ford, and I wonder what horrors he’s been through. All three of them—Adam, Dani, and Ford—have seen an ugly side of the world that I haven’t. My parents died in a convenience store robbery, the worst thing that’s ever happened to me and Max, but this is something else entirely.

One side of Dani’s mouth turns up, and she shrugs. “I thought he was invincible. He acted like he was. I used to think that everyone had that ability to get back up. To move through the pain. To see the line up ahead and how much sheer effort it’ll take to get there. But after he was gone, I met people who just didn’t have it in them. I’ve been doing this for a long time, and before this, being a marine, and before that, learning how to fight. I’ve seen so many people give up, and the only difference between the ones that give up and the ones that don’t is the will to succeed.”

I set my head back against the wall, too. “You know, you’re kind of my fucking hero.”

She gives a great big belly laugh, like it’s the funniest thing she’s ever heard. “I’m trying to give you a pep talk so you can be your own hero. I’ve faced down death so many

times that it doesn't even seem scary anymore. Face down your own demons until they look like puppies.”

I roll my eyes at that and push up onto my feet, my muscles feeling plenty relaxed now. “Somehow, I don't think I'll be entering any battlefields any time soon.”

Dani stands and looks at me with these narrowed eyes, like she's trying to decipher something that's barely visible under my skin. “Everyone has battles, Stella. I know you have your own.”

At her words, all the humor seems to get sucked out of the room, and I feel a vast emptiness. I still don't have a job, Adam and I haven't defined what it is that we're doing, and I feel like I'm floating through a world where everyone knows what their purpose is except for me.

I swallow down all the fear that wants to rise up in me and join Dani at a punching bag instead.

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CHAPTER 37

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STELLA

Adam finished the condo last night. When it was all over, all my furniture put back where it's supposed to go and the smell of paint barely lingering in the air anymore, Adam and I stood at the front door and admired it like parents looking at their newborn baby through the glass of a hospital nursery. In that moment, I was so happy, so excited by the way the place seemed to gleam with newness, that nothing else could penetrate.

But today, it all hits me.

Adam is done, and Adam won't be here every day anymore. He won't be leaning against my kitchen island, drinking cheap beer. He won't be uttering quiet curse words from various corners as he attempts to fix something. He won't stop what he's doing to watch me come in at the end of the day.

And I already miss him so much that the feeling claws at my throat like a hungry animal.

I shouldn't call him. I should give him space. We haven't even discussed what we are, if anything at all. I don't want to be a pest. But the silence in my condo is so loud it's like a physical ailment. I know he was at the gym all day, helping Ford out with things, but he should be home by now. Is he thinking about me?

I wander around the condo, running my fingers along my new countertops and turning all the lights on so that the shiny

new fixtures all sparkle. But it's all lost its luster. I feel like an addict that's been without a fix for too long.

I reach for my phone and dial Abby.

"Tell me not to call Adam," I command as soon as she answers the phone.

"Why? You like Adam."

I should have known I couldn't count on Abby to blindly follow orders. "Yeah, but he's not my boyfriend, and he's been gone less than twenty-four hours, and if I call him every day like some needy little toddler, he's going to stop answering my calls."

"He's not Mickey."

I feel like she just punched me. Like stepping into a time machine, my mind races all the way back to that day that Mickey and I fought and Adam tried to come to my rescue. Mickey told me I was clingy. He told me he couldn't breathe.

But Abby's right. Adam isn't Mickey.

"Thanks, Abby!" I don't wait for her to respond. I hang up, toss my phone into my purse, and race for the door.

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CHAPTER 38

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ADAM

There's a knock on my front door while I'm watching the Ravens game. At least, I pretend I'm watching the Ravens game. What I'm really doing is glancing at my phone every few seconds, checking to see if Stella has texted me and then talking myself out of texting her first.

I don't want to seem needy. I don't want her to think that I'm going to force her into a relationship when her and Mickey have only been broken up for a few weeks. I want to take things as slow as she needs, even if my entire body wants to race toward the finish line like someone who started sprinting before the gun even went off.

It's late, well after ten, which tells me that it's most likely Ford at the door. The gym is already closed up, and he's really the only person who would show up at my door without calling first. I pull open the door and feel a wave of delight threaten to drown me.

It's not Ford. It's Stella, looking up at me with her big green eyes, and I don't bother to try to decide if I'm going too fast before I bend down and sweep her up into my arms. She laughs against my neck as I kick the door shut behind her and pull the bag off her shoulder. It hits the ground with a satisfying *thump*, and I walk us to my bedroom.

"Please tell me you came here so I could fuck you," I say into her open mouth, feeling a thrill in my bones at saying the words. I didn't know before how much I was holding back, how much I wanted to wrap my hands in a woman's hair and

push so deep that we both howl and come so hard my head feels like it's disconnected from my body.

I never knew that making love could be fucking and that fucking could somehow be more intimate, but when I drop Stella down onto my mattress and she grins up at me like a flower up at the sun, I know that whatever I felt before, it's not what I'm feeling now. What I'm feeling now is a thousand times more.

"Yes," she breathes, reaching up to pinch her nipple through her shirt, getting me so hard that I swear I'm going to push right through my jeans. "I came here to let you fuck me."

I push up her shirt, shove her bra out of the way, and attach my mouth to her nipple. I want to devour her. She makes me feel like I've been starving my whole life.

I don't realize I'm saying her name again and again against her skin, like some kind of mantra, until she laughs and says, "What?"

I pull away and look at her, staring into those smiling eyes and feeling the warmth of her all the way to the pit of my stomach. Stella is so alive. She's been through hell and back, and every day, she wakes up and hits the ground running, making a path for herself in this world. Just the thought of it makes me want her so much it's a physical ache in my body all day. I snake my way up her body until I'm covering all of her. I know how much she likes it, how big I am, how I tower over her, how heavy my weight is on her. And the knowledge that that makes her wet drives me wild.

"I can't wait to make you come," I tell her, reaching for the button on her pants. "I can't wait for you to make those sounds you do when it starts to be too much, all that panting and whimpering and moaning."

Her pupils have gone wide, and one of those delicious little breathless sounds slips from her mouth when I slide my hand inside her panties and give her a hard, solid stroke up her slit. She immediately starts to buck her hips, but I pull away, not ready to get her there yet. Instead, I stick my fingers in my mouth and suck the taste of her off of them.

“Why aren’t you inside me yet?” she groans, and I laugh as I tug her pants down her legs, leaving her panties on.

“Because I want to tease you,” I tell her, helping her out of her top until she’s in just her lacy underwear. “Because I want to make you squirm and twitch and beg, and then when you can’t take it anymore, I’m going to drive into you so hard that you come on the first stroke.”

Her eyes fall closed, and she reaches up for her nipples again. She always does this, pinching the ends of them until she’s so worked up that her head is pressed hard into the mattress with the pleasure of it. I pull her hands away from her breasts, and she gives a frustrated scream in the back of her throat. And then I close my teeth over the tip instead.

She gives a full scream then, loud and long and shrill, and I release her, loving how red and distended her peak is. At first, I’m a little worried that I might have hurt her, but when I don’t immediately go for the other side, she takes her breast in her hand and presses the tip of it to my lips. I capture it hard with my teeth, and she emits a guttural groan in the back of her throat.

“So fucking sexy,” I say when I’ve released her, and then I push her knees apart, settle my erection against the wetness between her legs, and grind.

She makes a choked sound and starts to gyrate against me, rubbing her pussy all up and down my dick, and I just want to shove aside her panties and thrust all the way in.

“Please, please, please,” she’s panting, and I laugh.

“Not on your life,” I say, fisting a hand into her hair and tugging her head aside so I can bite down on the soft flesh of her throat. She lets out this erotic little sound, and I can tell from the stuttering way her hips move that she’s about to get off and I haven’t even taken my jeans off yet.

“Don’t you dare come,” I tell her. “Don’t take that from me. I need to feel you squeezing me when I’m inside you. Please don’t come without me inside you.”

She beats a fist on the mattress beside her. “Then get inside me.”

I press my mouth to her ear, reveling in the way she shivers. “No.”

But I do reach down between us, open the fly of my jeans, and take out my cock. I don't do anything, just let it rest, hard and pulsing, between us. But she's trying to pull away, trying to see it, her eyes pointed downward, and knowing that she's desperate to see it has it pulsing even harder for her until a drop of liquid appears at the tip.

“Give it to me,” she says, trying to reach her hand between us, but I pull it away and press it to the bed.

“Stop trying to be in control,” I say against her ear, and I start to grind again. There's nothing between us now but the tiniest scrap of lace, and I feel like I could push right through, break it to get to her, I'm so hard. Instead I give her enough pressure to have her head tossing back and forth. I'm so focused on the way she's getting me wet that I almost don't realize that she's saying something again and again.

“What, baby?” I whisper, reaching beneath her to hike her hips up into a position that presses me hard against her clit.

“Please fuck me, please fuck me, please fuck me.”

This time, I can't deny her. I reach between us, push aside her lace underwear, and drive deep. The world goes mute for a moment, like dunking my head underwater, and when it all comes back, I hear the sounds she's making, these quivering little mewls that almost make me come right then and there. I can't think about anything but thrusting at that point, nothing but the tight feel of her, and from the incoherent noises coming from her, I don't think she's fully aware either.

“Stella,” I say bringing my mouth to hers, not kissing exactly, but just pressing there. Her eyes are squeezed shut. “Stella, baby, I need to feel you come. I need it like I need air. Come for me. Please come for me.”

Her thighs tighten around my hips, her mouth opens on a silent scream, and then she starts to pulse around me and the

world dissolves into nothing.

When all the color returns and the ringing in my ears has stopped, I go up on my elbows and look down at her. She looks truly ravished, her hair a mess and her make-up all smudged. “So fucking beautiful.”

She stares up at me, this odd expression on her face, and then she says, “I want to know what this is.”

I don't like the tone of her voice, so uncertain when I'm still inside of her, going soft. I think I know what she means. I'm almost positive. But I need to know for sure. No more avoidance. “What *what* is?”

“This,” she says, pressing a hand to the middle of my bare chest. “Tell me what this is between us.”

If she's ready to talk about it then so am I. “You want to know what this is between us?” I rock my hips, my cock still hard enough inside her that her mouth twitches. “What it is, is that I've wanted you since that first day at Mickey's when I saw you through that crack in the door. You're all I think about. I wake up thinking about you, and I go to work thinking about you, and I come home thinking about you. You make me feel good, which is something I haven't felt in a long time. Truly good, like this bone-deep feeling, and I have no intention of playing it cool and saying we can be casual. I want everything with you. But if that's not what you need then I understand, and I'll take anything you'll give me.”

She grabs my face with both hands. “I want everything with you, too.”

And those are all the words we need.

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CHAPTER 39

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STELLA

Two days later, Mickey is standing on my welcome mat. I blink at him, one hand still on the doorknob. “Mickey, what are you doing here?”

“Can I come in?”

I move out of the way and watch as his eyes immediately start to take in things that are different. It’s been a very long time since Mickey was last in this condo. We spent almost no time here before I moved in with him, coming here to have sex just once when Max was out on a job in Philadelphia. I don’t glance over at the spot, the floor right in front of the window, where he held me down and made me scream until I was hoarse.

“Wow,” he says now. “Really spruced the place up.”

I feel like a deer caught in headlights. Does he know about Adam? And if he does know about Adam, how? Like he knows exactly what I’m thinking, he stops at the window, reaching down to press one fingertip to one of the red peonies in its vase sitting on the window ledge. Adam gave them to me yesterday, brought them home with him like some kind of 1950s working man.

“Guy has good taste.”

I sigh. I knew it. “Did you bug the place?”

He laughs. “What do you think this is, a spy thriller? I know everyone, and everyone knows you. And your good friend, Adam? He’s not been subtle. When he launched his website and started putting out feelers for jobs, his old boss —

my contractor, if you'll remember — came and gave me a heads-up.” He plucks a coaster off my bar, flops it back and forth in his hand a few times, and tosses it back down.

“And the fact that the two of you are together? Well, I just guessed on that one. I used to see the way he looked at you. You’d walk through the apartment, and his eyes would follow you.” He uses his first two fingers to illustrate, running them in front of his eyes, trailing from one end of the condo to the other. “He watched you like you were made of stars or something.”

There’s too much going on in my head, too much rattling around in my brain, and then he heaps on one more thing, one more perilous piece of information. “Look, I’m not really here to talk to you about all that. I know it’s not fair of me to be asking around about you. I just worry. Once you’ve worried about someone for three years, it’s hard to stop. But the reason I came here has nothing to do with any of that. I came here to offer you a job.”

It takes me a second to make my limbs move. Or my lungs for that matter. I walk over to the bar, pull out one of my rickety, way-outdated stools, and sit down before I pass out. “*What?*”

Mickey puts up his hands. “I know I just threw a lot at you, but I have spots to fill and I know you’ve been looking. It’s not a hundred percent up your alley, but—”

“But what?” It feels bizarre to be talking to him right now. It’s bizarre to think that you’ve removed someone entirely from your life only to discover that they’ve still been there all along, like losing an old teddy bear and finding it years later in a box in the attic.

“Ninety grand a year, health insurance including dental and vision, and a 401(k).”

At that, my heart stops. I try to read him the way I can read Adam, the way that everything Adam is thinking or feeling is written across his face in big, bold letters. Mickey isn’t that way. Mickey is a closed door.

“How do you know I’ve been looking?” It seems like the looking is endless. There’s always some reason why I’m not the right fit for every job I interview for. I’ve been on what feels like a hundred interviews since Mickey and I broke up.

Mickey shrugs. Right. All of his *sources* that have been keeping an eye on me.

“And I’m qualified for this job?”

Mickey’s expression might be a closed door, but the fact that he doesn’t say a word gives it all away. I hop off the stool, already shaking my head, but Mickey comes to stand in my way.

“It’s not a favor,” Mickey says. “Or rather, it *is* a favor. *You’d* be doing *me* a favor. Are you qualified? No. I can’t remember the last time we hired someone who didn’t have at least a Bachelor’s degree, but I need competent people. I’ve got a new office opening out in Rosedale, and the people applying for this job, they’re a joke, Stella. I need you. I need your brain.”

I throw my hands up. “What, you need someone to answer phones for you? Book appointments? Set up meetings?” It’s what I’m good at, I suppose. When Mickey met me, that’s exactly what I was doing for a little office downtown, the exact kind of job I’ve been trying to get back to ever since.

“I’m asking you to be a department manager. We’re pulling people in from all over the world to work on special projects and they need someone to report to, someone to keep them in line without actually getting involved in what they’re doing. And hey, it doesn’t have to be forever. Just long enough for you to get enough experience to stick on a resume so you can move on to bigger and better things, if that’s what you want.”

I stare down at his feet. More money than I’ve ever made and a chance to get back on a ladder that’s actually headed upwards. My breath is sawing in and out of me like I just ran a mile. This is exactly the kind of thing that Mickey would do, step right into the path of my life when it feels like it’s going

in the right direction, only to tell me that there's a better way. Mickey always knows best.

"Look, kid," he says, his voice going soft as he steps up to me, and I get the most irrational urge to step right into his arms, to let him hold me like he has so many times before. "I'm not here to mess with your life. And I'm not here to get in the way of anything you've been working for. I just want to give you a chance. You don't have to do it all by yourself. It doesn't mean you worked any less than anyone else."

"They'll know," I say quietly, the words not being able to find their way to the surface until he invited them to. I think about the way people used to watch me when I walked down the street, the way they whispered behind their hands when I was ordering lunch somewhere. I don't know if I can do that every day, not anymore. "They'll know that I got the job because I slept with you."

"You're not getting this job because you slept with me. You're getting this job because when I was out with the flu for a week, you handled all my calls. And because you re-organized my sock drawer, and now it makes so much more sense. And because you scheduled our dinner deliveries and grocery deliveries and anything else I could possibly need. You're precise, you're careful, and you're smart as hell. And if someone wants to say any differently, it'll be them needing a new job, not you."

"Will I have to call you Mr. Kline?"

"God no. Nobody calls me Mr. Kline. Makes me feel like my dad." And then he smiles at me, and a wave of comfort covers me. Because even though Mickey wasn't always the best boyfriend, he was a good provider. I always had everything I needed. Everything but him.

"Okay," I whisper. "Yeah. Okay. I'll do it. I need a job. A good one."

"It's a stepping stone," he says, pointing a stern finger in my direction. "Don't get any ideas about working there forever. Your job is figure out what it is you want to do and do it, without having to worry about money."

I choke back a sob, rubbing my fingers in my eyes, and when I pull my hands away, Mickey is gone. I spin around to find him over by the door, one hand on the knob.

“You’ll get a call later today. There’s going to be a lot of paperwork so I hope those meetups at the boxing gym didn’t permanently dent your brain.”

I laugh, but when he opens the door, letting in the sunshine, my smile falls. “Mickey!”

He turns back around to face me.

“Why did you do it? Why did you sleep with that woman?”

He has that mask on again, the one that makes it absolutely impossible for me to read his face. “I could tell you were miserable, but I knew you’d never leave. And I knew I’d never have the strength to let you go.”

“So you sabotaged us.”

Lines form around his mouth, a reminder of how many years separate us, enough for the rest of the world to take notice but not enough for either of us to care. “If I had thought you would be hurt beyond repair, I wouldn’t have done it. But look at you.” He gestures around the condo. “Better than ever. You’re amazing, kid. I never doubted it for a second.”

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CHAPTER 40

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ADAM

“Mickey came to see me today.” Stella looks up at me, all that long scarlet hair hanging around her like a veil. She’s in the kitchen, cutting vegetables at the island, her hands much steadier than mine are now that those words have fallen from her lips.

“He was here?” I ask, and her knife immediately stops. I didn’t mean for the words to come out in an angry tumble, but the second Mickey’s name comes into play, I want to break something.

She sets the knife down and wipes her hands on a towel. “Yes.”

“Why?” I don’t want to sound like I’m accusing her of anything. It’s not like I think the two of them just got done reuniting in the same bed where we sleep and talk and have sex every night and every morning. Stella would never do to me what he did to her. But I also know that he didn’t come here to catch up.

Stella puts both of her hands flat on the island, and that’s when I know to brace myself. She looks uncertain, like she’s trying to figure out how to explain herself in a foreign language. “He offered me a job.”

That...isn’t what I was expecting. For a second, confusion knocks away the anger. “Like, a *job* job?”

She huffs out a laugh. “Yes, a *job* job.”

I feel like I’m holding my breath, waiting for her to tell me that it’s a joke, but she doesn’t. I settle onto a stool, my legs

feeling the way they do when I've had too much to drink. "You said no, right?"

Her eyes shoot to mine, a crease appearing between her brows. "Why would I say no?"

I blink at her. "Why would you say yes?"

She lets her mouth fall open in a *are you kidding?* way. "90K a year, health insurance, and a retirement account."

It feels like she's laying bricks on my chest, one at a time. *Mickey, job, money.* I grind my teeth together. It's not her I'm angry at. It's Mickey. Mickey fucking Kline and all the shiny objects he holds in his hands every day to get people to do what he wants them to. "Stella, this is Mickey we're talking about. He treated you like shit."

She comes around the front of the island and leans back against it. She's wearing this little summer dress, and I have to look away from her legs so that I don't get distracted. "Sure, as a boyfriend, Mickey wasn't the best. But this is Mickey the professional. He's respected, and he runs a company that—"

"You're defending him now?"

She stutters, this strange little noise in the back of her throat. "I can't say no to an opportunity like this, Adam, regardless of what happened between him and me."

Hearing her say that makes me sick. It feels like I'm back in Mickey's condo, with the two of them on one side of a line and me on the other. "Yes, you can."

The kitchen falls silent for a second, our words like particles floating in the air, until she opens her mouth. "I don't understand. You're the one who told me it was okay to accept help."

"I didn't mean from *him.*" The words burst out of me, and as soon as they do, I know that whatever wall we were building between us, I just put the finishing touches on it. She's looking at me like I told her to go straight to hell.

"Is your ego really so enormous that you can't handle me working for my ex?"

Her words smack me in the face. “This isn’t about my ego, Stella. No one is ever going to see you as anything but Mickey’s girlfriend if you do this.”

“No one is going to see me as Mickey’s girlfriend!” she shouts, slamming her palms flat on the counter.

I lunge out of my seat. “Yes, they are, and you’re going to be a fucking joke at that job!” Her face goes pale, the color sliding out quickly, and I’m shaking my head, already trying to figure out a way to take it back. “Stella, I just mean—”

“I can’t believe you just said that to me.” Her voice comes out in a shattered whisper. First her lips part, then her chin wobbles, then she slams her mouth shut. “Get out.” The whisper is gone, her voice laced with ice.

My chest is puffing, in and out, in and out, something like panic starting to set in. “Stella, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I said, get the fuck out!” she shrieks, marching around the kitchen island and pointing one ominous finger toward her front door. I stand there for another minute, feeling desperate, feeling lost, wanting to stuff everything back into my mouth. I want to scream and cry and beg her to pretend that I didn’t say any of it. Because I feel the way we crack, the way I just started to irrevocably shatter what’s between us. But I can see it on her face. If I say one more thing, she’ll snap. So, I turn and leave.

CHAPTER 41

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ADAM

I storm into Berserkr and go straight for an empty punching bag. I don't even put on gloves or tape. The canvas immediately rips at my skin, until my knuckles are burning and there are smears of blood on the bag.

I'm still going at it, still pounding again and again, when a figure appears out of the corner of my eye and a voice says, "Hey, idiot. Those are brand new bags. You going to pay to have them cleaned?" I stop punching, and Ford wraps his arms around the bag to stop its swaying. "What happened?"

The pain in my hands is starting, throbbing and burning, and I like the way it feels. The pain in my hands is pulling focus from the pain in my chest, the burning in my knuckles distracting me from the burning behind my eyes.

"She's going to work for Mickey."

Ford's brow crinkles. "Okay. And?"

I reach up and grab the chain on the bag, until Ford and I are almost nose-to-nose. "And I don't want her working for that asshole."

He's quiet for a moment, the sound of grunting and running and punching filling up the silence. I can see him making an assessment in his head. Ford will always reserve judgement in any situation until he has all the information. Until he's lined it all up and can make an informed decision. He's never going to take my side just because we're best friends. And on a normal day, that would be fine. Today, not so much.

“So, what, he’s asked her to be his secretary or something?”

“No.” And that’s when I realize I don’t actually know what Mickey asked her to do. I didn’t even give her a chance to explain. “I don’t know what the job is.”

Ford taps his fingers in a line on the top of the bag. “Adam, the girl needs a job. She’s been interviewing since you met her. And now the richest person on the East Coast wants to give her a job that doesn’t involve scrubbing toilets and you’re going to fight her on it? It’s not like he’s going to be bending her over his desk every other Tuesday.”

My hand shoots out before I even know I’m going to move, connecting with his jaw. He’s three inches taller than me and probably thirty pounds heavier, all muscle, but his head jerks back. After a minute, he reaches up and rubs his jaw. And then he punches me in the cheek.

It’s bizarre how fast things can happen. How fast you can go from having a reasonable conversation with your best friend to beating the shit out of each other, rolling around on the mat, throwing punches and elbows.

I’m on top of Ford, arm cocked for a good punch, when someone’s arms wrap around me from behind, tugging me hard and knocking me enough off balance that I teeter off of Ford. It’s Dani, her purple-painted nails disappearing in the fabric of my shirt as she drags me back across the mat.

“Goddamn asshole,” she hisses in my ear. “That’s your best friend you’re punching.”

She pulls me to my feet with the sheer force of her strength and then continues to pull me backwards out the door, into the afternoon sun that immediately beats down on us. As soon as we’re in the parking lot, she lets go of me and I stumble, landing on my ass on the concrete.

Dani steps around and crouches down in front of me. “Whatever you’re pissed about, you better figure it out real quick. And from here out, you’re banned from Berserkr.”

I feel something seize up inside me. “You can’t be serious.”

She scoffs and straightens. “Oh yes I can. It’s policy. You started a dirty fight. That wasn’t about mat. That was about your fucking temper. I don’t need that shit anywhere near my gym. Go home, Adam. Call Ford when you’re done acting like a five-year-old.”

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CHAPTER 42

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STELLA

I squeeze my eyes shut, and the tears that have been poised on the edges of my eyelids spill over. There's a knock on the door. Everything inside me seems to stop functioning at the sound, my heart and my lungs and my stomach. Because it has to be him. Of course it's him. And I don't know how to feel about that.

I'm still standing in front of the door, trying to make myself open it, when he knocks again. I throw open the door. The first thing that goes through me when I see his face is panic. He's bleeding, but there's so much blood that I can't tell where it's coming from.

"Oh my God," I cry, pulling him into the condo and leading him over to the kitchen, where I wet a cloth and hand it to him while I prepare an ice pack. "What happened? Do you need to go to the emergency room? You might need stitches."

"I don't need stitches," he says as he carefully cleans his face. Once I've got a small ice pack made of ice wrapped in a towel, I turn back to him. I can see his face now, the whole thing, can see the still-bleeding gash along his cheekbone and the fact that his lip is split, some of the blood having collected along his bottom teeth. "I picked a fight with Ford."

"Why?" I press the ice pack to his face, and he takes it.

His shoulders sag. "I shouldn't have said what I said." At first I think he's talking about Ford, but when his eyes meet mine, I know he means earlier, all the things he said about

Mickey and me. He pulls the ice pack from his face, and I'm distracted momentarily by the cuts and the bruises. I pick up the abandoned rag, step closer to him, and dab at the bloody wounds.

"You said what you meant." It's easier this way, focusing on cleaning him up instead of looking him in the eye.

"No, I didn't. I just...I was jealous."

I pull the towel away from his face and look down at it, at the pink blood blending into the cheap fabric. "What could you possibly have to be jealous about?"

His eyes meet mine. Yes, it was much easier when I was focusing on his cuts instead of his eyes. "I want to be able to give you the life he did. I want to be able to take care of you."

I toss the soiled towel into the sink. "I don't need *anyone* to take care of me. I'm taking care of myself. When we started...doing whatever it is that we're doing, I thought I had found someone who would support me no matter what. That's the kind of guy it seemed like you were."

"I am." He pushes up off the counter and comes toward me, crowding into my personal space. "I do support you. I was wrong, and I know that."

"I can't trust you." The words spill out of me, and I take a big step back from him. "What you said, if that's in there somewhere, just waiting to come out the second that we get in an argument..." I shake my head. "Are you going to throw my insecurities in my face any time I'm doing something you don't approve of?"

To his credit, he looks horrified, like I hit him. "Of course not. Earlier, that wasn't about your insecurities; it was about mine. I'm sorry, Stella. I'm so sorry."

I have to look down at the floor because if I look him in the eye, I won't be able to say everything that I need to. But looking at the floor, I have to watch his shoes and the way they're moving toward me, inch by inch, until he's standing right in front of me again, his hands coming up to cup my elbows.

“Forgive me, Stella,” he says, and I feel the puff of his breath against my face. “I swear, I didn’t mean it. I want to be here standing next to you when you accomplish everything you set your mind to.”

His cheek brushes mine, and I can’t keep my hands from coming up to rest first on his chest and then his neck, and then into his hair as he bends and finds my lips.

He groans into my mouth. Nothing feels as good as kissing Adam does. It’s like the first gulp of air after you’ve been underwater a little too long, and against my better judgement, I’m trying to climb him, hooking my leg up on his hip until he hoists me into his arms and pushes me against the fridge. With all of him against me, I forget everything else, what we were talking about and what he did wrong. All I can think about are his strong arms holding me up, his narrow hips wedged into my open legs, his tongue stroking over mine.

“Stella,” he says against my mouth. “Stella, forgive me.”

I open my eyes, and the light of the kitchen, momentarily blinding, shakes me out of my frenzy. I shove on his shoulders until he seems to blink awake too, letting me slip to the ground. As soon as my feet hit the tile, I take a few big steps away from him. I can’t think when I’m too close to him. I press my fingertips to my swollen lips, trying to anchor myself to the earth again.

“I think I just need some time to myself,” I finally say. It’s been sitting on the tip of my tongue, right against my teeth, since he walked into the condo. “I think I made a mistake jumping from one person to the next without stopping to spend time on myself. This job, whatever it looks like, it needs my focus.”

He’s got both his hands on his hips, a confused expression on his face. “So, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that you got what you needed out of this deal, and I got what I needed, so maybe we need to go our separate ways.”

A gust of air bursts from him. “Come on, Stella. You don’t mean that.”

“Yes, I do.”

He runs a hand through his hair, and then both of his hands come up and he grabs it like he needs to hold on. “I don’t want to be without you,” he says, and I feel the lump rising up in my throat. He lets go of his hair and looks at me, his bright eyes shining and desperate. “Stella, everything inside me was empty and dead before I met you. I feel alive for the first time in a decade. I can’t just let it go.”

I grit my teeth. “I’m not giving you an option. I’m telling you that this is done.” The words burn coming out, but I have to hold my ground. He looks completely different to me now, and maybe I never really even knew who he was. I don’t even know who I am. And that’s why I need him to leave.

We stand like that for a long time, and I feel the stillness in the air around us, like one of us has pulled the pin on a grenade and we’re waiting for it to go off.

“I need to breathe,” I tell him, hand at my throat. “And I can’t do that if I’m always wondering whether or not you’re judging me. You were right: everyone is always going to see me as Mickey Kline’s ex-girlfriend. Especially you.” He’s already opening his mouth to speak, but I shake my head. “It’s okay, Adam. We did what we needed for each other. It’s time to let go.”

He has a hand curled into a fist on the countertop, but he still turns and walks to the door. When he’s got it open and is standing in the doorway, he turns and looks at me one last time. “I’m not letting go.”

As soon as he’s gone, I lean back against the kitchen island and take a few deep breaths, even though all I really want is to scream. I still can’t breathe. It feels like the ground has split open beneath my feet, and I can’t decide whether to try to save myself or throw myself in.

I go back to my cutting board where my zucchini sits, waiting for me to return to it. But all I can do is stare down at

it. All the rage bubbles up into the tips of my fingers, and I reach down, pick up the cutting board, and throw it at a cabinet behind me. And immediately, I regret it. Rushing over to the cabinet, I examine it, finding the dent the cutting board just made in the surface. The surface of the brand-new cabinet that Adam put in for me. Now ruined.

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CHAPTER 43

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ADAM

The nightmare starts the same as it always does, the heat of the summer, the sun shimmering off every surface, blinding in its intensity until it's like a white ray blanketing the world. When I have the dream, I don't feel active in it anymore. Instead, my body is frozen in place, waiting for what I know will happen, like watching a movie I've seen a hundred times.

The bomb falls, the one that takes out half the camp, even Ford and Dani lying dead at my feet. I look down at them and feel the twist of my stomach, but I can't move. I never can. No running for cover, no screaming for help. Only me standing in the middle of it all, watching it happen. That part is real. That part happened. Six years ago, the force of the bomb knocked me down, and I watched, unable to move, as the camp burned.

Except this time in the dream when the next bomb hits, the one that never came in the real story, someone else falls at my feet. I can feel the pressure of their body pressing into the tips of my boots. Stella looks up at me with lifeless eyes. She looks the way she did the morning we first met, bare except for the sheet wrapped around her body. It's soaked through, red spreading until there's no white left on the material at all.

This is usually the part of the dream where I wake up. It's the part where I start to scream, and then the nightmare melts away and I'm alone in my bed. And that alone is a horror, but at least there are no dead bodies, no dead faces of my friends looking up at me, like I could have somehow saved them. Just me and the dark.

But I don't wake up. I look up at the sky, see the comets starting to streak through the atmosphere, and I wait, all the panic starting to rise up in me like a wave ready to cascade over my head. But I don't wake up. I don't wake up. I don't wake up. I'm stuck, like someone has locked me in my own mind. I can still feel the weight of Stella at my feet, but I don't want to look down, don't want to see her that way again, empty and stiff.

But I'm still here. The world refuses to end and take me with it, so I bend down to press my hands to Stella's face. I can't feel her skin, the warmth that's always just under it, her pulse beating at her neck, right where I like to kiss her. It's like my hands aren't even real, moving right through her, a mirage. But she's the real one, the one made of flesh and bone, and I'm the one who goes through her like a ghost.

"Stella," I whisper. I reach down to grab her, and this time we're both solid. I wrap her in my arms and lift her off the ground into my lap. Her head falls back on her neck, and the next time I say her name, it comes out a scream. "Stella! Stella!" I'm shaking her, trying to bring her back, trying to get her to breathe with her perfect lungs. "Stella! Stella!"

And then, like someone has unlocked the door I was pounding on all this time, I come out of the nightmare, screaming Stella's name into the night, my throat raw and my body drenched in sweat. I press my hands into my face, and I let out a shudder before reaching out for Stella.

My hand meets open air, empty sheets. I turn on my side, and the reality of my situation hits me like a fist to the face. What I said, the way she looked at me, the fact that the best thing I've felt in years is over. Stella is gone.

CHAPTER 44

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STELLA

I'm sitting in the parking lot of Berserkr, watching people go in and out. Through the big front windows, I see Ford talking to a guy in the entryway who's almost as big as he is but with dark skin and dreadlocks. They laugh, and part of me itches to go in, to get back to what Dani was teaching me a week ago.

God, has it only been a week?

This is Adam's territory, and I know that, but I already made this appointment with Dani and I want to follow through on it like I've never wanted to follow through on anything. Tomorrow I start at my new job, and I know that being here, feeling the rush of learning how to maneuver my body, the power of learning how to use my fists to defend myself, is exactly what I need.

But I don't know if it's really an option anymore.

I do a quick scan of the parking lot. Adam's truck is nowhere in sight, and I'm at once relieved and disappointed, my pulse skittering out of control at the mere possibility that he could be here. It's been a week, and there hasn't been so much as a text from him. My chest starts to pull tight now, that anxiety settling in under my ribs, like something that I was trying to hold on tight to has just been taken out of my hands.

I drop my keys into my purse and go inside. It's early, the sky still a little grey, so the gym is mostly quiet. Anyone who uses the gym before work is already gone, but there's tell-tale grunting coming from every corner nevertheless.

Dani leans against the doorway leading into the front hall, waiting for me when I walk in. “I wasn’t sure you were ever going to come in,” she says with a smile in her voice.

“I wasn’t sure if I should.”

She glances over at where Ford is still chin-deep in his conversation at the front desk and then takes my hand and pulls me into a quiet corner filled with medicine balls and portable weight racks. “You’re always welcome here,” she says, wrapping her arms around a standing punching bag like it’s her best friend.

“Did Adam tell you what happened?”

She shakes her head. “He hasn’t been around. He mentioned a few things to Ford but then...” She glances over at him again and clears her throat before looking back at me. “They got in a fight, and we kicked Adam out. He’s banned from the gym.”

“Banned?” I knew about the fight of course, but this?

She shrugs, but it’s anything but casual. “It’s policy. If anyone starts a real fight, plays dirty, that sort of thing, they get tossed. Never thought it would be Adam though. He’s always had a temper, but he’s always been able to control it.”

I lean my head back against the wall behind me and sigh. “Well, we broke up, if that wasn’t obvious. He got mad because I took a job working for Mickey.”

She has a weird, twisted expression on her face. “He handles fear like a stray dog.”

I lift one eyebrow in her direction. “What do you mean?”

“Strays guard food with their teeth because they’re afraid it could be their last meal. They’ve had to fight to survive for so long that it’s all they know how to do. You put a plate of food in front of Adam and then you told him Mickey was just on the other side of the door.”

At first, it’s sadness. Unbearable sadness that turns into a lump at the base of my throat, but then that vanishes and it becomes something else. Anger so acute that I feel my face go

hot and my limbs start to tremble with it. Everything that I've been shoving down for the last week rises up inside me, like someone has lit me on fire, the flames rising up all the way to my chest. Without thinking, I take a step toward the punching bag beside me and punch it, again and again and again, until Dani reaches out to stop me with a hand on my wrist.

"You're going to hurt yourself."

"What an absolute fucking idiot!" I shout, and the exclamation seems to bounce off every wall until everyone in the gym is turned in our direction. My back hits the wall behind me, and I cover my face with my hands, feeling that tug in my chest again, the anxious feeling I've had there since last week that keeps me asking *did I make a huge mistake?*

When I pull my hands away, Dani is watching me closely. "I've known Adam for a long time," she says. "When he realizes he fucked up, he'll be back."

I'm already shaking my head by the time she's done talking. "I'm the one who ended it. I'm the one who told him to leave. He's not coming back. Why would he?"

Dani lets out this little huff of a laugh, like I've said the dumbest thing she's ever heard. "Because he's in love with you."

Whatever was pulling tight inside my chest, stretching further and further, snaps entirely in half. "What? No, he isn't."

She crosses her arms and levels me with a look. "He may not have ever said it to you, but that boy was telling Ford all about you before you'd even looked in his direction back at Mickey's place. He's absolutely crazy about you."

I can't process that information right now, so I file it away to examine later. "It doesn't matter. I broke up with him. He's not going to come crawling back."

Dani shrugs. "Maybe not, but I've never known Adam not to right his wrongs. It's kind of his thing."

I hate the hope that sprouts inside of me at her words. I don't want to hope anymore. I don't want to spend time

wishing for things I have no control over.

“Come on,” Dani says, shaking me out of my thoughts.
“Let’s get you some gloves.”

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CHAPTER 45

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ADAM

It's been two weeks. When Stella kicked me out, I stopped taking side jobs, little things that were still rolling in even as I was working on Stella's condo. When I posted photos of her condo to the website, I got a slew of new calls, real live business, but every time I consider calling a client back, going to their house and doing work, it's like my body is made of mud.

The phone calls have slowed, and so has this feeling inside me that feels like it could kill me. I just don't want to do it without her.

Laying on my couch, having a beer at nine in the morning, the time every morning that Stella is most likely arriving at her job at Mickey's company, I open my email. Answering emails is easy. You don't have to be verbal with anyone or look them in the eye.

There are half a dozen inquiries in my inbox asking about pricing and availability, and I'm reading an email from a woman who needs new shutters installed on her balcony when there's a *ding* on my phone, and a new email comes in. I watch all the others slide down on the screen to make room for it.

Interview Request, the subject line reads. An interview is the exact opposite of what I want to do right now. That requires a lot of verbalization and eye contact, and I'm not sure I could manage it in my current state. Who in the world would want to interview me anyway? What do I even have to say about my business? That I worked my ass off to get it off

the ground and now I'm letting it crash and burn because it feels like my insides are made of slime?

I click on it anyway to see what they're asking, and when I read the contents, I bolt up on the couch.

Dear Mr. Lake,

My name is Addison Delacroix, and I'm an article writer at Baltimore Business Journal. We periodically interview new and upcoming businesses to bring them even more spotlight. I got your number from a trusted contact of mine, and I've looked into your small business. It seems that you have a lot of promise as a business owner.

Anyway, I'll cut to the chase. I'd like to interview you and Stella Hart for a piece that I'm writing on home-building in the area. There's been a surge in sales this summer in the South Baltimore area, and I know that many of our readers are looking for recommendations on home repair and design. Would this be of any interest to you? If so, I would love to meet with you next week. Feel free to reply to this email or give me a call at the number listed below. Thank you!

Addison Delacroix

Baltimore Business Journal

This woman, she doesn't just want to interview me. She wants to interview Stella, too. I have no idea who this contact is of hers, but does it matter? If it means that Stella and I might be in the same room for even a minute, I've got to take a chance on it.

I've considered showing up at Stella's door and getting on my knees for her. I've considered calling her and begging her to forgive me.

Because holy fuck, I was an idiot. So what if Stella is working for Mickey? So what if he's still in her life? She

wasn't happy with him when they were together. It was there in her eyes every time she walked by me. The light that I saw in her in those last few weeks, when we were together and even before that, when we were working on her place together, that light wasn't there when she was with Mickey.

Whatever life she had with Mickey, she's not going back to it, and I was an idiot for being so goddamn judgmental over whatever the hell it is that she wants to do. I certainly can't blame her for taking that job. But I can blame myself for being a huge jackass about it.

And so can she. She told me it was over. She told me to leave. And showing up in her life after everything she said felt like the wrong thing to do. When someone tells you to go, you go.

But here's a chance, a way that we might be forced together, if only for a little while. But in order for it to happen, Stella has to agree to it, too. It can't just be me. It's got to be her, and it's got to be at her place, the place we built together.

I reply with a single word: *yes*.

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CHAPTER 46

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STELLA

I've been staring at my phone for the better part of an hour. An email came through from a reporter to see if Adam and I want to be interviewed for some sort business spotlight, and I've been reading over the email again and again. It feels like a mistake. Why would she want to interview me? I didn't do anything. All I did was agree to let Adam rip my entire life apart, which he did, thoroughly and with expert precision.

It's been two weeks, and there still hasn't been any contact. I've met with Dani at Berserkr once more, and according to her, there still hasn't been contact between Adam and Ford either, which somehow makes me even more sick to my stomach than the thought of there not being any contact between him and me.

"Ms. Hart?"

I tear myself away from the looming email and look up at Tin, an intimidatingly smart woman who can't be more than twenty, who dances circles around me every day when we discuss software. Luckily, my job isn't to understand the software that Mickey's employees are here to create and sell. My job is to keep them on task and delegate work, which I'm much more suited for.

"Yes?"

I see her jaw tighten, like she's steeling herself, and then she steps up to my desk and sets something in the center of it: her company tablet. "I don't mean to bother you with this," she says with her crisp English accent that always gives me a

little thrill, “but seeing as how you personally know Mr. Kline, I thought you might be okay with my making a suggestion on the new prototype.”

I look down at the tablet and use my finger to maneuver the 3D model she’s created of the new drone that her team has been working on. She’s not the head of the team, but only because she’s so young. She’s easily the smartest person in our entire department. I’m not entirely sure what I’m looking at, but I can see the section that she’s highlighted in red. “What exactly is wrong with it?”

Tin sighs. “Not wrong with it, necessarily. It just could be much more streamlined. I’ve tried talking to Dane about it. He keeps saying he’s going to send correspondence on it up the chain, but then he never does.” She folds her hands behind her back. “You haven’t received any emails on the subject, have you?”

This is technically very inappropriate. I’m not Tin’s direct higher up, so she really shouldn’t be coming to me about something like this, but if her team lead isn’t listening to her then I’m glad she did.

“And you think it’s worth talking to Mickey about?” I haven’t spoken to Mickey since my first day, when he sent expensive coffee and pastries for the whole office to celebrate and called me briefly at the end of the day to make sure that everything had gone well. There are about twelve people between me and Mickey on the food chain, but he’s still on my speed dial.

Across my desk, Tin is wringing her hands. “This change will give us an edge over other competitive products just like ours. It’s a tiny access change that will make a big difference for the user. So, yes, I think it’s worth mentioning. But I understand that this is not exactly professional, and I don’t know anything about you or Mr. Kline, so if this is totally out of line—”

“It’s fine,” I cut in.

I know it’s breaking all the rules. I know that the exact thing I didn’t want at this job was preference or special

treatment. But Tin is right. Mickey is my friend, and I know that if this is something that could give them a real leg up, he'll want to know about it.

“I'll text Mickey a little later.”

Tin's eyes light up. “Really?”

I nod. “Of course. I'm not going to let those boys stomp you into the ground because you saw something they didn't.”

Tin sighs, a relieved exhalation. “Thank you so much, Ms. Hart.”

I almost tell her not to call me Ms., that it sounds way too formal. But then I don't. Because I *am* her boss. “No problem. Send me this diagram and anything else that's relevant to your idea. I'll forward it all to Mickey.”

Tin smiles, and I'm struck for a moment by how pretty she is, with dark, flawless skin and hair cut short and styled elegantly. She leaves without another word, and I'm left with one more thing I don't want to look directly at.

An email from a newspaper.

A pending phone call to Adam.

And now a text to Mickey.

Somehow, the text to Mickey seems the easiest. I pull up our last text thread, and something hits me square in the chest. Our last text thread was about me ordering breakfast, dated back to that fateful day. For a moment, I have to put my phone down and live in the memory: Adam and me arguing, him dropping the Mickey bomb. It was so painful, and yet I can't imagine it now, staying with Mickey, living in that life with him forever. In a way, Adam saved me.

I unlock my phone, but instead of opening a text to Mickey, I open the email from the newspaper and send a quick reply: *I would love to meet with you.*

CHAPTER 47

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ADAM

The three of us agree to meet at Stella's condo. I don't have any actual contact with Stella. Addison acts as an oblivious mediator between the two of us, sending emails to both of us until we finally land on where and when to meet.

Pulling up in front of Stella's place that Friday, I have to take a moment to let the bone-deep *wanting* wash over me. Being here, parking in the same spot and walking up the same steps to her door. It's like being run through with a broad sword how much I want to go back to a month ago when I knocked on the door and, as soon as she opened it, kissed her.

I want to do that now, throw open the door, press her to a wall, and kiss her until everything is fixed between us, but that's not happening today. Today, I need to apologize, to say all the words that have been swirling around in my brain for the last month and then give her space to think.

The door is cracked when I get there, a sign to both me and Addison that we should let ourselves in, and with one hand on the doorknob, I glance up and down the street. I don't know what Addison Delacroix drives. I have no idea if she's in there with Stella already, or if I'm about to walk into Stella's condo, where we'll be alone. That possibility sends my heart into arrest until I have to find the courage to push open the door.

I hear their voices immediately, two feminine voices laughing over something in the kitchen, and my brain—my heart—separates the sound of Stella's laugh, just on the edge

of being goofy in the best way, and then they both fall silent when my boots start to make noise against the floor.

They both look over at me. Addison is sitting on one of Stella's ancient bar stools, and Stella is pouring coffee into three mugs in the kitchen. The early-morning light shines in through the window, casting everything in a grey, washed-out hue, and it makes Stella look like something out of a Renaissance painting. Her eyes lock with mine, the pot of coffee forgotten on the counter, and her mouth parts like she's going to say something, but Addison fucking Delacroix beats her to it.

"Mr. Lake!" she says, jumping up off her stool. The grey light just makes her skin look green. She clicks over to me in her heels and holds out a hand.

I'm too distracted by Stella just behind her, not wearing make-up. I'm struck with an image for a moment: Stella in the morning, bare-faced and flushed, her hand between us stroking her clit while I fuck her.

"Mr. Lake?"

I pull myself back into the room. "Addison, right?" I say, reaching out to take her hand. I wonder if she can feel it, this thing that's floating in the air between Stella and me. It feels heavy, like a shift in the barometric pressure before a rainstorm, and I feel it all along my skin, the electricity. Can Addison feel it? Can Stella?

"Yep!" Addison says, and it takes me a second to realize that she's still gripping my hand, her palm beginning to sweat against mine. I look down at where we're clasped together. I'm not really holding onto her, but she's holding onto me. And when I look up into her face, I see that her cheeks are flushed.

I pull my hand away from hers and take a full step back, but I know I wasn't quick enough. Stella is staring at the spot where Addison was just holding onto me.

"Hey, Stella," I say, trying to avert her attention. Her eyes stay glued to Addison for a second longer, her face unreadable,

and then slowly shift over to me.

“Hey, Adam,” she finally says, but there’s no warmth in it. The words are completely robotic, and I can’t read whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing. If she’s happy to see me, she’s certainly not showing it. She comes around the island with a cup of coffee in each of her hands, offering them to me and Addison before going back to get her own.

Addison gestures toward the living room and takes the loveseat that Stella must have purchased recently, crossing her legs and reaching into her bag for a legal pad and a voice recorder, which she clicks on and sets on the coffee table like she’s conducting an interview in the early 90s. While Stella is getting her coffee cup, I take a seat on the couch across the table from Addison and feel a heavy satisfaction low in my stomach when Stella takes the spot next to me. Her cushion shifts just enough that her leg presses against mine, and I feel it like I’ve been set on fire.

“Okay, you two,” Addison says, and I can’t tell if she’s one of those people with a bubbly personality or if she’s faking it because that’s what she thinks she has to do. “Let’s start at the beginning. Tell me first how the two of you met.”

She could have asked a million other questions that would have been easier to answer. But this is Stella and me, and nothing about us has ever been easy. Stella shifts enough to meet my eye, and I look back at her. It has to be her call how much she wants to tell.

Before either of us can say anything, Addison waves a hand as if to brush off the question. “You know what, let me tell you what I already know, and you can fill in the holes. Mickey already told me that you, Adam, were working for the company that did the remodel on his condo.”

Something shoots through me like lightning. Mickey. He’s Addison’s contact. He set this whole thing up? One look at Stella, and the way her mouth has popped open gently, tells me that she didn’t know either.

“And of course,”—Addison gestures at Stella—“I can only assume you were still living with Mickey at the time. So, I’m

guessing the two of you met there, but how did you come to be in business together?”

A line forms between Stella’s eyebrows. “Well, we’re not exactly in business together. I’m not involved in the company. Adam and I made an agreement that he would fix up my condo if I let him use it for advertising purposes.”

“And here we are!” Addison says, throwing up her hands, and I feel a little embarrassed for her. Whatever is in the air, she definitely can’t feel it.

“Yes,” Stella says kindly. “Adam did an excellent job.”

Addison’s eyes move around the room. “I agree,” she says. “What an improvement.” She must have seen the pictures on the website. She must have seen how this place looked before I came into it, and from the way some of her light seems to dim, I can tell that her opinion on its previous state isn’t high. I grip my coffee cup tightly enough that some of the heat from the liquid seeps into my palms.

“This area,” I say before she can ask another question, “has been run down for years but only because all the attention has shifted elsewhere. There are tons of places like this that have great bones but need a little love and attention. Stella took good care of this place before I came along, but there was a lot she just didn’t have the time or knowledge to do.”

Beside me, one corner of Stella’s mouth tilts up, and I can’t stop staring at it. “What Adam means is, a pipe burst in my kitchen, my toilet broke, and my walls had turned brown.” Her gaze shifts to me, and there’s light in her eyes, light that makes me feel choked.

Addison clears her throat, and when we both look back at her, some of her bubbles seem to have popped. She looks from me to Stella and back again. And then she forces a laugh. “Right. Well, that’s all very fascinating.” She consults something on the pad in front of her and then says, “So, Adam, tell me about your company.”

I launch into my story, the one that I’ve told Stella, the one that’s printed on my website, the one I’ve perfected that leaves

out all the ugly details, about how my parents died and how when I came back from the service, there was nothing left for me but what I already knew how to do with my hands. I tell her about Cylburn and about working on Mickey's condo.

Addison is listening intently, her eyes staying glued to me and completely ignoring Stella. She keeps crossing and uncrossing her legs. "So, the two of you met while you were working on Mickey Kline's condo, and you struck up a deal?"

"We struck up a friendship," I say, feeling the warmth of it all the way down to my toes. I wasn't sure when I walked back into this condo what I would be walking into. I wasn't sure what I was going to say to Stella or how we were going to move forward, but I know now. This thing that Stella and I built, I'm not letting it go. I'll say what I have to say. I'll do what I have to do.

I'm not walking out of her life again.

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CHAPTER 48

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STELLA

I don't realize I'm staring, that I've been unable to take my eyes off him for who knows how long, until Addison makes a few grumbling noises and says, "Why don't the two of you walk me through the place and show me the work you've done?"

We all stand and Adam gestures around my tiny living room.

"To begin with," he says, "I redid the windows in here, and Stella and I painted the walls together."

A flash in my mind: Adam and I with paint on our cheeks and wrists and clothes as we worked and then eventually stopped working to have sex on the clear-plastic tarps instead. My face heats, and I look down at the floor, away from both of them.

"We have someone scheduled to come tomorrow for pictures," Addison says, finally turning to me as if she's just remembered that I'm here at all. She doesn't ask me if that's alright, but I'm pretty sure it's because Addison Delacroix thought she was going to meet Adam here, flirt with him to within an inch of her life, and then take him home, either for a one-night stand or eventual marriage. It's hard to say. And I can't exactly blame her. Adam is delicious, and every photo of him on the website happens to feature his impressive back muscles or his flexed biceps, and it's hard to resist.

But resist she must because now that he's beside me again, now that he's just barely pressed against my side as we all

squeeze into the doorway of the bathroom to admire the new fixtures and the new floor, I know I'm not letting him go again.

All week I've been trying to figure how to text him or call him, turning my phone on again and again and again with the intention of finally saying everything that I need to say, but then I just can't say it. Or rather, I can't seem to put the right words in the right order to form the right sentences.

But he's here, and his eyes keep meeting mine as we move from room to room explaining to Addison all the work he did while I play again and again in my head the words that Dani said to me: *because he's in love with you.*

And I hope she's right about that because it's enough to make my palms sweat. It's enough to have me counting down the seconds until Addison Delacroix exits the building and I can finally spit it all out. Until I can beg him to take me back.

The three of us step into the bedroom, and I feel it, the way the air seems to stretch, pulling taut around the three of us. There's enough room for three more people, plenty of space for all of us to have our own breathing room, but Adam stands so close to me, like he has to squeeze in tight.

Addison steps into the room to examine my new windows, and Adam shifts barely, the back of his hand brushing against mine. All of the breath rushes out of me, and I must have made a sound because Addison turns quickly, and it takes her only a second to drop her eyes to where Adam's hand touches mine.

I expect him to pull away, but he doesn't and neither do I, and Addison just rolls her eyes, her legal pad falling to her side.

"Mickey assured me that this was a serious business," she says, and any kindness that might have been in her voice before is gone now. There's no flirtation or shy smiles left.

Adam scowls. "It is."

Addison's eyes shoot to me. "Are you really certain that you want to be publicly tied to yet another boyfriend?"

Adam looks outraged, like Addison implied that I'm a serial killer. "Excuse me?" he says, and somehow, I think he's more upset about this turn of events than I am. He's taken a step forward, halfway between Addison and me.

Addison sighs and puts up her hands in a defensive manner. "Look," she says, glancing past Adam and directly at me. "I'm not trying to insult you. I'm just making sure you know what you're getting into. If I publish this piece and the two of you are together, people are going to make assumptions, and if people think you started seeing someone else while you were dating Mickey Kline, it could put you in a difficult position. Everyone who's anyone in this town is friends with Mickey."

I look up at Adam, who's turned his face just barely to mine, looking at me over his shoulder. "I don't care what anyone thinks of me," I tell both of them. "I'm going to do whatever I want."

I expect to see concern on Adam's face, that same hardened look he gets around his eyes and jaw when he's trying to figure out how to fix a problem. But instead, the corners of his mouth turn up.

Addison laces her hands behind her back. "Okay. Then I'll do my best to leave out any incriminating details, and the two of you will have to handle the backlash yourselves."

Adam snorts. "We've got plenty of experience in backlash."

Addison gives a small bow and the three of us move back into the living room. And I guess the whole thing is done because Addison scoops up her bag and goes straight for the door. "I'll email you, Stella, when the photographer gets back to me about timing tomorrow. I'm assuming that it needs to be early."

She stops at the door and spins to face us, and I feel like I'm on a Tilt-A-Whirl. I need everything to slow down for a moment. "Yes. I leave for work at 8:30."

She gives a short nod and reaches for the doorknob, but Adam says, “Wait. Addison. Why did Mickey set up this interview?”

Addison blinks at Adam, and I blink at Addison. And then Addison shrugs. “I don’t pretend to understand Mickey’s motives for this sort of thing, but I’m assuming it’s because he wants you to be successful.”

Adam looks over at me, hands in his pockets. “So, he did it for you.”

I want to bop him on the nose like a spoiled puppy. “No, he did it for *you*.”

Adam stays frozen as I bid Addison goodbye and go to close the door behind her. And when I turn, he’s still standing exactly where I left him, hands in his pockets, bent slightly as if I’m still standing beside him.

“Finish your coffee,” I say, walking into the living room and settling onto the couch. I don’t have long before I have to leave for work, but I also don’t think that anyone is going to make a fuss if I’m a little late.

Adam comes to sit beside me, but he does it slowly, like he’s afraid that all of my furniture is made of paper and he has to be careful or it’ll crumble under his weight.

I take a deep breath, ready now to say what I need to. “Adam, I want to apologize to you.”

He’s already shaking his head before the words are all the way out of my mouth. “Absolutely not. Stella, you have nothing to apologize for. I’m the one that needs to apologize. I was an asshole.”

“You weren’t an asshole.”

We’re speaking over each other now, him leaned toward me, and me up on my knees on the couch, and neither of us touching our cold coffee.

“I *was*,” he says. “I just got so terrified of losing the first real thing I’ve ever felt.”

I put up my hands to stop him. “I was afraid that you were turning into Mickey, being another boyfriend that I couldn’t count on.”

He pulls my hands down from between us, so that he can look up at me unobstructed. “I wanted to support you, but I was scared that support was going to be the end of us. You were with him for three years, Stella.”

I put a hand over his mouth gently, feeling his warm breath against my palm. “I don’t want Mickey. I want you.”

He doesn’t pull my hand away, just looks at me over the tops of my fingers, blue eyes shining like comets blazing across a midnight sky. His hand comes up to settle on my hips, warm and safe, and then he yanks me down onto his lap. We’re kissing before I can even make out who initiated it, and tasting him again is like being on a diet and then being served chocolate cake. I moan into his mouth, and he fists both of his hands into my hair.

We break apart. “I just want you, too,” he says, shoving his hips up against mine so that I can feel where he’s getting hard. “If you tell me you’re mine, I’ll believe it. I won’t question you ever again.”

I wrap myself around him like an octopus and give my hips a firm, heavy roll. “I’m yours, Adam. And you’re mine.”

He’s nodding, our mouths slipping against each other, and then he’s pulling at my clothes. We’re both naked in less than a minute, and as if he’s trying to show me that this won’t be a gentle re-coupling, Adam turns me away from him, settles me into his lap, and slides into me from behind.

I shout up at the ceiling because, even though I’m wet and ready for him, the size of him is still enough to stretch me to the point of discomfort. But the stretch is good, so good that I can’t fight back the sob that bursts out of me, and the sound seems to send Adam straight off a cliff.

He growls and grabs me at the nape of my neck, guiding me to lift myself off of him and then slam back down, bent

forward so that the only contact our bodies have is where his hand is holding onto me and his cock is inside me.

I'm getting wetter and wetter every time I push back onto him, and he wraps one long arm around me and finds the heat between my legs. I grab onto his thick thighs that are hard with strain as he circles his big, calloused fingers around my clit.

"Oh God. Oh God. Oh God." I'm chanting it over and over as I get closer to where I need to be, closer to that moment when I'll squeeze him hard inside, where a part of me will die for him, and I slam myself down harder and harder until the room seems to fragment into tiny pieces. "Oh God, I'm coming!" I scream, and Adam scoops me back up, holding onto one of my knees to spread me open wide, pulling me back against his chest and going at my clit so hard that I'm just screaming, screaming myself raw and coming so hard that the world blurs into nothing but color around me.

I feel Adam's groan against the back of my neck when he comes, the sound spreading warmth through me it's so familiar.

And then we lie there like that, me on top of him, and his arms around me as he goes soft. We're trying to catch our breath, but when we turn our heads and our lips find each other, we gasp into each other's mouths instead.

I feel that pinch in my chest, the one I've been trying to ignore for a long time now, but it won't be ignored anymore. "I love you, Adam."

He smiles so wide that his eyes almost disappear. "I love you, too." With his index finger, he tilts my face up to his and kisses me.

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B. Randall has been a voracious romance reader since she stumbled upon a spicy book at the public library when she was fourteen. She's spent her life falling in love with fictional men and is excited to finally be writing her own. When she's not writing, she's teaching writing workshops for all ages, drinking way too much Dr. Pepper, and watching every period piece she can stream in her spare time. She lives in her Dallas with her husband.



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