

LEA HART

Complicated



COMPLICATED



Book Two

Lea Hart

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DEDICATION

For My Daughters, My Heartbeat

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank the team at CMT Editing for their editorial wisdom.

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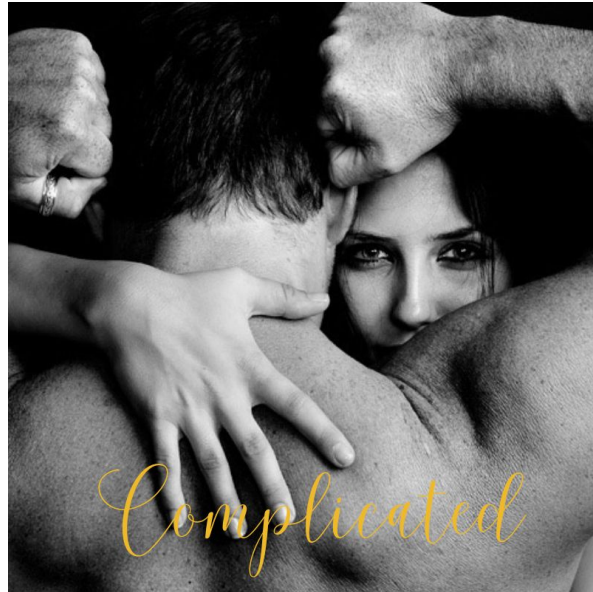
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*Bossy. Heart of gold. A snarly mess of a boss.
Send help before I fall for the man I work with.*

He's a retired Marine with a dirty mouth.
She's a whimsical accountant that loves following the
rules.

Not only are their opposites attracting they are colliding.

Cole McCallan has decided that the year he's spent squabbling with his accountant needs to come to an end. All he has to do is convince her that going on a date isn't the worst idea in the world.

Kelly Morris is ready for the real deal and knows the one making a play isn't a candidate. No matter what the chemistry snapping between them is saying.

Come see what happens when they give into the heat and
let their guards down.

It's a sexy romantic escapade that you don't want to miss.

Hart Notes: This book existed briefly as Rogue but has
undergone a significant makeover. If you happen to be one of
the twelve people who read it, worry not, it's a new delicious
tale. I took the manuscript down to the studs, and the new
story bears little resemblance to the original. I hope you enjoy
Complicated because I had so much fun with my hammer and
saw.

CHAPTER ONE



Cole walked into the conference room, ran his hand over his neck, and wondered how he managed to hire the most beautiful accountant in Vegas.

Tearing his eyes away from Kelly's curvy figure, he reminded himself that he was a respectable businessman with a multi-million-dollar security company and needed to act accordingly. His hood-rat days were long behind him, and behaving like a delinquent wasn't in the cards.

No matter how tempting the woman in front of him was.

Clearing his throat so he wouldn't startle the hell out of her like he usually did, he watched Kelly slowly turn. A professional smile lit up her face, and there was nothing he hated to see more.

Show me the real you.

The woman was fire and ice, and he much preferred her bitching him out to the polite indifference she loved to smother him in. "Here, as requested."

"Thank you, Cole, for stopping by. There are a few items I'd like to review before I finish your year-to-date summary. Jared has brought some expenses to my attention, and we need to make sure the men understand the new policy."

He strolled to her side. "Why do you use ten words when five will do? You've worked with me for close to a year. Can we just cut to the chase and move on to the fun stuff?" Color rose in her cheeks, and her dark green eyes sparked as she snapped a pencil in half.

There you are, sweetheart.

“It’s called speaking in full sentences and being professional. A concept that I know you’re familiar with, regardless of how you choose to behave with me.”

“We’re past that. I run a thirty-six-hour day even though there are twenty-four, and I hate wasting time. And since you’re intimately entwined in my business, we can speak frankly.” The gold in her green eyes flashed, and he wondered if she ever thought about entwining her body with his. When her eyes got mean and squinty, he decided probably not.

“If I spoke *frankly*, as you put it, your hair would light on fire, and you’d get rid of me on the spot.” She tapped her fingers against her hips. “On second thought, maybe it’s time to do just that!”

“Go ahead.” He leaned forward. “But I’m guessing you wouldn’t dare because you’d miss me like hell.” He bumped her shoulder. “Admit it; you like wrangling with me, if only for the pleasure of showing me who’s smarter.” She arched an eyebrow. “I’ll take that as agreement.”

“Then you’re a fool.”

She bent over to pick up the broken pencil, and he bit back a growl. The woman had full hips, and he wanted nothing more than to have the privilege of sinking his fingers into her flesh while kissing her good manners goodbye.

Unfortunately, it would never happen because he didn’t screw around with the people he worked with. Add to that the fact that she’d never be interested in the likes of him, and he knew the fantasy would stay locked up safe in his head.

Placing the broken pencil on the conference table, Kelly picked up a stack of papers and pierced him with a stern gaze. “I’m guessing you never told the men about the allowable expenses they could claim when traveling.” She waved the papers back and forth. “Renting porn in their hotel rooms and charging condoms in the hotel gift shop are not expenses Uncle Sam allows.”

Cole stepped close enough to surround himself with her scent and felt his heart thunder. Damn flowers, got him every

time.

Taking the stack of papers, he collapsed into a chair. “This isn’t something that needs my attention. And, for your information, I had Heidi send a memo exactly like you asked. Rome wasn’t built in a day, and the guys will take a minute to get on board with the new rules.”

Taking a seat across from him, she folded her hands. “You can’t play both sides of the fence. One minute you want to micro-manage me, and the next, you complain that I’ve wasted your precious time by making you aware of a situation.”

Leaning back, he dropped the papers on the table. He hated when she was right, and considering it happened about ninety-five percent of the time, it was a real pisser. “Fine, I’ll stop bitching. I know you’ve been pulling our ass out of the fire since this IRS thing came up, and going through five years of tax returns is a lousy job.”

“Thank you for recognizing the situation for what it is.” She straightened the folders on the table. “I’m just trying to do the job you entrusted me with. Implementing systems in the first year is always brutal, but I promise it’ll be worth it.”

“Is Jared going to be able to maintain everything, or do I need to hire you full-time?”

“Jared is an extremely competent bookkeeper and more than qualified to maintain all the programs I’ve put in place.”

“You didn’t answer my other question.”

“I have no interest in working with you full-time, but I am more than happy to give you several recommendations.”

“Don’t hold back, Kelly. Tell me how you feel.”

“I know it’s hard to believe, but your colorful personality isn’t all that entertaining.”

Slapping his hand to his chest, he tried to look wounded. “Considering you threaten to have me killed at least once a week, I’d say we’re even.”

“Which should tell you that a long-term business relationship would never work.”

“Should I infer from the comment that a personal one would be of more interest?”

“Only if pigs fly and all the other men on the earth have been taken in a zombie apocalypse and batteries suddenly become unavailable.”

He let out a bark of laughter. “At least you left me with a small glimmer of hope.”

She gave him a polite smile. “I’d be considered rude if I didn’t.”

“Couldn’t have that happen.” He loved the push-pull they had going, and most days, he didn’t know who finished on top. Not that it mattered because if they ever got together, he didn’t care what position they ended up in. “Do you truly not want to work here full-time?”

“I *truly* don’t, Cole. And it’s not because you irritate me more than any other human.” She ran her hand over the table. “I like owning my own company and can’t imagine ever working in the same place day after day.”

Nodding, he wondered how dull his days would be when she left. “I get that, but know I won’t give up on trying to convince you to join us.”

“Thanks to my hard work, you won’t need me to come in more than once or twice a year. Your twenty-five-million-dollar company is no longer running like a start-up, and you’ll be fine without me.”

“Do you think the business is hitting that mark?”

“Absolutely. The contract you just signed with the UFC for securing the fighters when they’re in town could put McCallan Security at thirty million by the end of the year.”

Leaning forward, he rested his hands on his spread knees. “God damn, that’s not bad for three brothers who barely escaped juvenile hall.”

“Not bad at all,” she replied, closing her laptop. “You three have a lot to be proud of.”

The smile that accompanied the statement was the real deal and hit her eyes. He'd probably seen the thing a dozen times since they started working together and was never prepared for when it hit.

And this time, it was pointed at him.

Damn miracle as far as he was concerned.

He knocked his knuckles on the table. "I'd offer you a drink in my office, but I doubt that's your idea of a celebration."

"Or yours," she replied.

Deciding another tit for tat would do them no good, he shrugged. "I'll have Heidi send another memo about the porn and condoms."

"Can I make a suggestion?"

"You always do." He leaned back in his chair and tried to prepare himself. She might look like a straight-laced accountant who believed in following the rules, but she had a twisty mind and came up with a real doozy every once in a while.

"Why don't you buy the team tablets? We can expense it as equipment or take the deduction if you want to make it a gift."

"Are you trying to help the guys with their *entertainment needs*?"

Kelly gave him a disapproving frown. "You've said a thousand times the men who work for you are the company's most important resource. I'm merely suggesting a way to ensure the resource is as happy as can be."

Waving his hand, he let out a laugh. "It's a great idea; you should tell them you thought of it."

"More than happy to. I might also tell them to buy the big box condoms from Costco and not get ripped off by purchasing them in a hotel. It's highway robbery what they charge, and wasting that kind of money makes me sick."

It was hard not to bust out laughing, but he somehow managed. “Make that point at the Friday roundup, and I’m sure you’ll have their attention.”

“I won’t be here because I’ll be with another client all day.”

Feeling a stab of frustration, he tried not to let it show. He knew she had about a dozen other clients, and it pissed him off to think of her doing for others what she did for them.

“Who are you working with on Friday?”

“Gio Zanetti. He’s opening another restaurant and club, and I’m setting up the books for him.”

“Gio of the Zanetti Crime Family?”

“Yes, but his businesses are legit, and he’s running clean operations separate from the family interests.”

“You sure about that?”

Standing, she smoothed out her tailored skirt and then started stacking folders. “Absolutely! I handle all the financials, and the Red Door is above board.”

He tried to keep his eyes away from her ass as she moved around the table and decided standing would make it easier. “As much as a sex club is legit.”

“Adult Entertainment Club and fine dining establishment.”

“Is that what it’s called now?”

“That’s how the IRS sees them, so yes, that’s what they’re called.”

“And you have no problem working with the son of a crime boss at his sex club?”

“No, why would I?”

When she looked up with her big doe eyes and waited, he decided to keep the answer to himself since it would reveal how protective he felt.

The idea of her being near the club didn't sit well in his gut, even though Gio was a close friend.

At least he knew the security was top-notch since he and his brothers had installed the systems and trained the men on site. Not that Kelly should be around the kinky scene. He was well acquainted with what occurred on the upper levels of the club, and it wasn't anything she needed to see. "Just make sure Gio or Sal walks you out after you're done for the day."

She let out a laugh and started putting folders into a box. "Don't worry. Gio always takes excellent care of me."

What the hell did that mean? He watched her pick up her laptop and wondered if she and the mobster had a thing. Maybe he had it all wrong, and she wasn't into monogamy and vanilla sex like he assumed. *Maybe* she was getting it on with the heir to a crime throne and liked the Red Door for more than their excellent food.

Letting a picture of what that might look like roll around in his mind wasn't a good idea, so he wiped it away immediately. "I should head back to my office. Do you need anything else?"

"No, I'll be back on Monday. I plan to complete the prep for the meeting with the IRS and set up the new billing system, so I should be here most of the week."

"Roger that." He strode out of the conference room and headed to his office. Once he stepped in, he was greeted with a view of the Vegas sunset filling the wall of windows. Taking his chair, he spun around and tried to process that the company he'd started five years ago was a success.

Seventeen years ago, he'd had a choice between the military and jail, and had he not chosen to go into the Marines, who knows where he would've ended up?

Letting out a snort, he knew it was a lie because there was no doubt he would've ended up on the streets of his hometown in Bakersfield.

Doing criminal shit and trying not to get popped.

Ten years with Uncle Sam had straightened his ass out and made him a man. And for the hundredth time, he silently thanked the judge who gave him a chance at a new life. Had it not been for him, he'd probably be spending his evening in a jail cell and not in his big office enjoying the sunset.

Filling a fancy crystal glass with a finger of bourbon, he looked around the spacious room and then held it up. "Thank you," he muttered. He wasn't sure if there was a God, but wanted to acknowledge how damn lucky he and his brothers were.

They had made it out of the hell they were born into and building a life they could all be proud of.

A life that even a woman like Kelly would want to be a part of.

CHAPTER TWO



Kelly walked toward the elevator and heard her name. Stopping, she turned and saw beautiful Gio Zanetti give her a smile that would make angels weep. The man was as beautiful as any Michelangelo painted and certainly could've been the inspiration for the angels that decorated the Sistine Chapel.

“*Cara*, are you done for the day?”

“*Si, e tutto e in ordine.*”

“Excellent Italian. Have you been practicing?”

“*Si ogni giorno. Sto ascoltando il...* lessons. Shoot, I don't know the word for that.”

“*Lezioni.*”

She repeated the phrase. “I'm still planning on going next year and want to be able to communicate as much as I can.”

“If you practice every day, you'll have no problem.”

He reached around her, pressed the button for the elevator, and she inhaled his cologne. He was such a hard man to resist. She wondered why she bothered.

They stepped in, and she leaned against the railing. “I haven't had a chance to study the week's numbers yet. Is the surcharge we implemented for personal props netting what we projected?” The doors slid open, and she walked off with Gio following closely. “It should add another significant revenue stream, and I'm hoping the first week's numbers reflect that.”

“*Cara*, it's Friday. Let's get our drink before we start seducing each other with our talk of revenue and profit.” Leading her to the bar, he nodded to the barman. “A martini for Ms. Morris and my usual.”

“You got it, boss.”

“Tell Fabrizio we’ll be ready to eat in twenty minutes.”

“*Ovviamente.*”

Gio pulled out a chair, holding Kelly’s hand as she sat down. “The surcharge idea was brilliant. Everyone who used the rooms this week brought their whips, cuffs, and whatever else they’re into, and we’ve made a killing. Add to that the decreased costs we’ve incurred for cleaning, and it will be much bigger than either of us anticipated.”

The drinks were delivered, and she lifted her martini and clinked it against Gio’s glass. “The idea came to me at church, and I’m happy it’s working out.”

“What made you think about my club’s clientele during the Sunday sermon?”

“It was about cleanliness and made me think about the expense the club incurs for maintaining the private rooms and open spaces.” She took a sip of the chilled martini and felt her body relax. “Are you ready for another idea?”

“Always.” He leaned forward. “You have profitable ones, and I love nothing more.”

“What if you offered lockers for your most valued members?”

“Intriguing, go on.”

Crossing her legs, she sat back. “You have space on both floors to build a row of lockers. What if you made those available to your top clients? They could be super glam, and a twenty-five thousand yearly membership fee would allow your VIP members to keep their things on site. We could also charge an additional fee for cleaning and perhaps another if they wanted to keep a supply of lube or condoms.”

Letting out a full laugh, he covered her hand. “That’s brilliant.”

“I thought of it yesterday when I was over at McCallan security and saw how much condoms cost at a hotel gift shop. Some of the guys added it to their expense report, which isn’t

deductible, but beyond that, it's a crime how much they're paying."

"So, you think that's an area we can exploit?"

"Absolutely. At premium prices, no less. If the Marriott can charge fifteen bucks for three condoms, you can too. Not to mention some other key items."

Taking her hand, he kissed it gently. "You make it very hard not to fall in love with you. You are not only beautiful and charming but brilliant."

She gave him a sad smile. "If only our love story were possible. Unfortunately, I can't manage the Mafia wife thing."

"Completely understandable."

"I'm guessing the number of condoms you'd need between the two clubs would allow a significant discount from a supplier, and the profit margin would give you a crazy ROI."

"You're so sexy when you talk about return on investment."

"Wait until I start talking about deductions." She finished her drink and stood.

"Don't tempt me." He stood and straightened his tie. "Because I like you too much to lead you into a life you might not survive."

"I appreciate that," She followed Gio to the table, waited while he pulled her chair out, and then took his own.

"What is Fabrizio going to feed us this evening?"

"I have no idea, but it will be perfect."

"As always." Gio poured them each a glass of wine. "To the continued success of your ventures."

"*Saluti*. The Red Door thanks you for your brilliance."

She watched the waiter set down a stuffed artichoke served in the Roman style. "Rizio is trying to make me fall in love again, and this time it just may work."

“Don’t joke because he’ll lose focus if he thinks he’s in the game.”

“I’m serious. I would love a man to make this for me every night.”

“What else does your dream man need to do?”

“Be honest about what he wants.” She cut into the beautiful food and ate a bite. “Also, be interested in something more than a fling.”

“Sin City may not be the best place to find what you want.”

“I know. I’m just not quite ready to leave.”

“Once this town gets ahold of you, it doesn’t like to let go.”

“I agree, but all I’ve managed to do since I started my own business is work and occasionally spend the evening in your club. I hardly ever go to a show or dancing, so maybe I’d be better off in Los Angeles. I have a group of childhood friends that I would love to see more often.” She tilted her head. “I wondered if inviting them here for a small dinner would be okay. I know its members only, but I would love it if you could make this one exception.”

“*Cara*, you can invite as many people as you like.”

“Thank you.” She dipped her head. “They want to celebrate my birthday, and I thought it would be fun to show off Fabrizio’s food.”

Gio slapped the table. “We will host it.”

“No. That’s not necessary.” He threw up a hand with a sharp shake of his head. “I don’t want to impose and—”

“*Basta.*”

Surprised by the force in his voice, she saw the mobster side of Gio that brooked no argument. He wasn’t a man to be trifled with, and she didn’t want to be the one to try. “Thank you.”

“You are family, and we will celebrate your birthday.”

“It will just be a small group. Maybe eight at the most.”

“What about all those men who flock around when you’re sitting at my bar?” He ran his finger along her cheek. “Perhaps you’d like to invite one of them.”

Taking his hand, she smiled. “They only want a fling.”

“Perhaps there’s a Prince Charming among them.”

“I don’t need a prince, just someone who’d like to take me on and treat me respectfully.”

“I wish it could be me, but we both know it wouldn’t work.”

“True.” She gave him a sad smile and then sipped her wine. “At some point, I’ll probably end up in LA, living a life very similar to my parents. But before that happens, I’ll give this town one more year to see if I can find happiness.”

“I doubt those staid businessmen that love to buy you drinks are capable, so I suggest you widen your horizons.”

“I agree, but that’s all I seem to attract.”

“Or all that you notice.”

Their plates were cleared, and they were each given a small Caesar salad. As she studied it, she considered Gio’s words and vowed to improve her observation skills.

Maybe what she wanted most was hiding in plain sight.

CHAPTER THREE



Cole walked into the Red Door with his brother Zach and waited for the concierge to check them in. Glancing around the lobby, he noted the security men were in place, and the corner cameras were active.

It had taken them close to six months to develop the mix of technology and personnel that worked for the club, and he was proud of what they'd accomplished. No significant incidents had occurred in the two years it had been open, and he wanted to keep it that way.

The club was massively success, and he had to give it to his friend for what he'd put together. They served some of the finest food in the city and offered adults a place to indulge in whatever pleasure they were into. Add to that the high-stakes poker games, and this was Vegas at its best.

He handed the concierge his black card. The McCallan brothers sure had come a long way from the trailer they grew up in, and a day didn't pass that he didn't appreciate it.

The armed services had allowed them to get out of their hometown and away from their abusive drunk father, and there were days he couldn't believe how far they'd come.

"Enjoy your evening," the woman said as she released the lock on the door that separated the lobby from the club.

"Thanks," Zach replied.

"You want to grab a drink in the bar before we eat, or are you about to chew your arm off?"

"Nah, I'm good. Had a late lunch at the UFC campus after the meeting."

They strolled into the large room, and he noticed his accountant sitting at the bar. “What the hell?”

Zach quartered the room. “What and where?”

He grabbed a table and slid into a seat. “Kelly Morris is chatting up some douche in a custom suit at the bar.”

Zach let out a chuckle. “Good for her.”

“No, not fucking good for her.” Before he could say more, the waitress approached, and they both ordered drinks. The moment she left, he felt his brother’s assessing gaze. “She shouldn’t be hanging out here.”

“Says who? She’s a grown woman and can do whatever she wants.” Zach sat back and stroked his beard. “You know, I’m starting to see the bickering thing in a new light. I thought you two went at each other because you were a hard-ass, but now I see you have the hots for her.”

“I’m a thirty-five-year-old man and don’t get the *hots* for women.”

“No, you usually just have a two-week fuck fest and then never see them again. Maybe you’re bent out of shape because someone has come along, making it seem old.”

He tore his eyes away from Kelly. “When did you become a philosopher?”

“I’m the middle brother; it’s my role along with peacemaker.”

Cole accepted his drink from the waitress and took a long slug. The Four Roses single-barrel whiskey slid down his throat, and he found it did an excellent job of soothing his irritation.

His brother’s words held more than a hint of truth, and he couldn’t ignore how Kelly stood out in a sea of women dressed in things that left little to the imagination. She was the exception in the room in a simple wrap dress, and he never wanted anyone more.

He’d long been an inhabitant of a world where everything was available, and the idea of working for a woman was more

enticing than he could put words to.

Deep in his gut, he wanted to earn the privilege of having Kelly beneath him, begging him to do things only he could.

“One of us needs to go over there since it would be rude to ignore her,” Zach said as he lifted his chin to greet the man approaching the table. “And since you’re the one with a hard-on, it should be you.”

Their friend Xavier ambled up, and Cole stood. “Hey, man, take my seat. I’ve got someone to talk to.”

“When you’re done, come back so we can catch up.”

“Will do.” Giving his brother a nod, he turned and stalked toward the bar. “Just going to say hi,” he mumbled. “And kill the hopes and dreams of the guy flirting with her.” He quickly read the slick son of a bitch’s body language and knew a hand would land on Kelly’s leg before long. A thing he didn’t plan on letting happen.

Sliding his hand to the back of Kelly’s chair, he waited for the windbag to wind down his tale of glory. The moment the guy took a breath, he leaned in. “Hi, babe.”

Kelly’s head whipped around, putting their mouths within kissing distance. A minor shift of his weight would make it possible, but the way hers was twisted suggested he better not.

“Cole, what in the world?”

He tipped his head in his brother’s direction. “Zach and I came by to grab some dinner.”

When the bozo cleared his throat, he felt Kelly’s shoulders stiffen. Waiting for the inevitable blast, he braced himself.

Silence.

The kind that suggested he would soon be paying for his ballsy move.

“Allen, this is Cole, and we—”

“Are together.”

Allen drained his drink and then stood. “Kelly, you’re a beautiful woman, but I don’t do threesomes with a dude.” He held up his hands. “No judgment, just not my thing.”

He watched the man saunter off and took the abandoned seat, signaling to the bartender for another round. “So, that was fun. I had no idea my accountant was into the ménage scene.”

“I’m having a hard time keeping my temper, and that’s never a good thing in a professional relationship.” She picked up a swizzle stick and tapped it against the bar. “But considering you just butted your nose into my personal life, I think it might be okay.”

“I was helping out.” Her eyes slid sideways, and he took the stick out of her hand. “I’ll just hold on to this for now because we sure don’t need to visit the ER.”

“Don’t be such a baby. How much damage could I do with one little plastic stick?”

“A lot more than I’m comfortable with.” The drinks were delivered, and he lifted his glass in her direction. “And you should be thanking me because I just saved you a ton of grief. Any man named Allen, who wears a two-thousand-dollar suit, will never give you what you need.”

Kelly lifted her drink. “And what is it that I need, oh great one?”

“A real man who believes a woman’s needs come before his own.” He locked their gazes. “No props, games, or hitting. Just two people allowing themselves to become servants to lust and desire.”

Not a word of response. *Damn.* Making her speechless was a lot more satisfying than he could’ve imagined.

“So, you’re saying hypothetically that if we lost our minds and decided to spend some time together, I’d have to leave my merry widow and whip at home?”

Checkmate.

The blood in his brain disappeared instantly as a picture of Kelly standing over him, kitted up and cracking a whip, filled every corner of his mind.

It sure as shit wasn't his thing, but if she asked real nice, he'd certainly consider it. "I'm open-minded, so I'd say just about anything is on the table." He leaned forward so he could see the gold flecks in her emerald eyes. "But my preference is straight-up fucking. Sweat soaked, skin sliding together as a man gives his woman pleasures she never imagined." Her cheeks bloomed pink, and he winked as he sat back. "But, if you want to add something else, I'll consider it. Hypothetically."

Swiveling around, so she was facing the bar, she shrugged carelessly. "Of course."

"But neither of us is interested, so it's just two people throwing around crazy theories on a Friday night."

"Exactly. We both know sexing up a coworker doesn't end well, so crossing that line would be disastrous."

And that was the harsh dose of reality he needed. She was his freaking accountant, and he never mixed business with pleasure.

Lifting his bourbon, he drank half of it down and wondered why she was the woman who made him want to let go of his hard-won discipline. He didn't do stupid shit anymore, and following a whim wasn't something he'd done in more than fifteen years. With the last ten minutes being the exception. "Yeah, the two of us tangling it up would never work."

"You couldn't handle me, so I'd have to agree."

Thinking down his glass, he barked out a laugh. "We both know it would be the other way around." Her mouth lifted, and he prayed it wouldn't be one of her polite smiles. When it lit up her face and mischief danced in her eyes, he felt happiness explode in his chest.

"Guess we'll have to agree to disagree." She looked at him over the rim of her glass. "I'm guessing you're a hell of a

lover, but I doubt you have enough staying power for more than one night.”

Turning slowly, he quelled the frustration rising in his chest. “Are you suggesting I don’t have what it takes to light your world on fire and give you a night you’d never forget?”

“One night absolutely, but beyond that...no way.”

His head was going to explode, and the last thing he wanted was to let her know she’d gotten to him. Taking a small sip of his drink, he plastered on a smile. “Is this your scene, or are you just hanging out after you finished working with Gio?”

“I’d ask you the same thing.” She looked over her shoulder and waved at Zach. “Despite your earlier speech of not being into props and role-playing, I’m guessing you’re here for more than the delicious Osso Bucco.”

“I come for the scampi monastero santa chiara.”

“I’ve only had the shrimp once, but it was amazing.”

“You a regular here?”

“Gio and I have dinner together at least once a week, so perhaps I am.”

The affection in her voice bothered him, so he ignored it. “You and Gio have a thing going?”

She patted his hand. “That’s none of your business.”

Speaking of the damn devil, Gio Zanetti fucking GQ mobster, ambled up and kissed Kelly on the cheek. The man was too good-looking for his own good and somehow managed to look like a prince, even though he was as dirty as they came.

“*Cara*, do you need anything?”

He watched her eyes warm as she touched Gio’s hand. “No, *mi amore*. I’m going to call it an evening.”

“Let me know when we’re celebrating your birthday. I want to give Fabrizio a chance to create a memorable evening.”

“Can I let you know Monday?”

“Or course.”

He watched Kelly stand and wondered if he'd be invited to the celebration. “I can walk you out to your car.”

Gio lifted his hand and snapped his fingers. “That won't be necessary. She has to get her things from the office, so it's better if Sal escorts her.” He stepped back. “Till next week.”

“Thank you.” She took Sal's outstretched hand and then looked over her shoulder. “Have a good evening, Cole.”

He watched Gio's head of security lead Kelly to the red door that separated the bar from the private rooms and tried not to chew on her words. She could talk a good game, but he didn't know if that was all it was. When Gio took the empty seat and gave him a shit-eating grin, he knew the next five minutes would not be much fun.

Clearly, the man had seen the exchange between them, and being the damn insatiable gossip he was, there was no way he was letting it go.

CHAPTER FOUR



Kelly entered the coffee shop, saw one of her best friends, and yelped excitedly. “I am so freaking happy to see you.” She embraced Daisy tightly. “And can’t believe we have an extra day to spend together.”

“I’m glad it worked out.” Daisy held Kelly at arm’s length. “Why is your smile faltering? Did someone misbehave and hurt your feelings?”

“Let’s grab our drinks first. I ordered ahead, so they should be at the counter.”

“What did we do before online ordering?”

“Stood in line like fools.” She picked up their cups and handed Daisy one. “May we never return to those dark days.”

“I second that.”

She followed her friend to a table near the back and watched Daisy take the chair facing the door. “Spy habits never die.”

“It’s like breathing. I’m not even conscious of it anymore.”

“Speaking of your CIA days, are you really considering returning to the field full-time?”

“I am.” Daisy sipped her coffee and then set it down. “I’m ready to see if I still have what it takes to be operational.”

She covered her hand. “I won’t bother giving you a speech you’ll ignore, but I want you to know that you have nothing to prove.”

“I won’t let that op define me, and the only way for that to happen is to go back out there and kick some ass.”

“But—”

“Enough about that business. Tell me what’s bothering you.”

She wanted to dig into the issue more but saw the determination on Daisy’s face and knew it would be futile. “It’s not a big deal. I just had an inappropriate conversation with Cole, and I’m dreading seeing him in the office.”

“Who started the convo?”

She studied her cup. “I think he did, but I did nothing to shut it down.”

“Are you a tiny bit interested? I know you said in LA that it was a no, but has something changed?”

“No! He’s a snarling alpha that is constantly pushing my buttons.” She sipped her coffee. “Does he have a heart of gold and a ton of integrity? Yes, he certainly does. But he doesn’t date the same woman for more than two weeks, and I don’t need to put myself in that revolving door. I’m tired of wasting time on men whose main goal is to fuck their way through the city.”

Daisy snorted loudly. “I guess you feel pretty strongly about it.”

“Clearly.” She looked from side to side. “I just said fuck loud enough for everyone to hear.” Dropping her head, she shook it. “I just want to finish the projects and get out before something regrettable happens.”

“Like falling on his dick?”

Choking, she covered her mouth with a napkin. “Please warn me before you say something like that.”

“Sorry. I’ve been spending too much time with operators. My manners have all but disappeared.”

“No, they haven’t. You’re just saying what I’ve been thinking. Cole is deadly handsome, and if I was in a different place in my life, I would definitely take him for a spin.”

“But you’re spun out and tired of the merry-go-round?”

“Yes.” Lifting the top of her coffee off, she took two gulps. “I want to build a relationship with someone, not have a string of flings that leave me unsatisfied.” She pushed her hair over her shoulder. “Maybe Cupid will have time to do me a solid now that he’s got Andi and Tom matched.”

“I don’t know that we should give the little cherub that kind of power.” Daisy leaned back and swung her foot. “What if we consult with one of the high-end matchmakers?”

“I think something like that would just be a glammed-up version of online dating, and I’d rather bleach my eyebrows than go through that kind of torture.”

Daisy shuddered. “I’m not one to piss on someone else’s parade, but I do not get that beauty trend.”

“Same.” She pushed the lid back on her coffee. “I should get over to McCallan so I can finish my projects before I kiss Cole’s stupid face.”

Daisy checked her phone and grimaced. “I should bounce, too. I have a meeting in thirty minutes.”

“Alright, I’ll see you at the house later.”

“Perfect.” Daisy threw their cups away and then took Kelly’s hand. “Do you want to invite the other McCallan brothers to your birthday dinner?”

“No. Cole’s feelings would be hurt, and I don’t need to start a fire that I can’t put out.”

“Okay.” Daisy looked up. “Speak of the devil. Here comes the most troublesome McCallan.”

She saw Seth enter the coffee shop. “He seems like the sweetest one.”

“Maybe that’s how he acts in Vegas, but when he’s running a mission, he’s the wild card that always takes one too many risks.”

“I think all the brothers like to see how far they can push things.”

“Genetics. There isn’t much you can do to fight them.”

Which is why giving in to my curiosity is such a bad idea.

She watched Daisy and Seth shake hands and knew that the sooner she got away from temptation, the better off she'd be.

Two hours later, Kelly sat in her temporary office next to the kitchen and tried her best to ignore the smell of popcorn. She hadn't been hungry five minutes ago, but now that the scent of the buttery treat floated into her office, she was starved.

She checked her watch and realized it was getting close to twelve, so she pulled out her lunch bag and dug through it. Frowning at the healthy choices she'd packed, she decided the snap peas would have to do.

She wanted a burger from Umami with fries, but that wouldn't happen since she'd vowed to eat healthy for at least two days. Popping a snap pea into her mouth, she pretended it was salty deliciousness. Hearing a bag crinkle, she looked up and saw Terrence leaning against the doorway. "Keep moving because I do not need the temptation."

He gave her a wink. "I can't tell if you're talking about me or my snack." He looked down and then shrugged. "I bet it's me 'cause few women can resist my acres and acres of dark brown muscles."

She took a snap pea from her bag and popped it into her mouth. Terrence Norris was six feet five of flow, and his charisma was as strong as any she'd seen. But they were not attracted to one another, despite all the flirting and sassing they did with one another. "I was surprised to see you at church yesterday."

Smirking, he walked into the office and collapsed into a chair. "Momma informed me it was the monthly picnic, which isn't something I like to miss. So, you can bet your skinny

white ass I was there praising the Lord like any good Christian.”

“Is that what you call flirting with Jazzy Taylor?”

He shook his bag of popcorn and then set it on the desk. “That wasn’t flirting. The woman is immune to me and making me damn near insane.”

She grabbed the bag of popcorn and took a handful. “She is a faithful woman, and I doubt she’s ready for anything you have in mind.”

He took the bag back and grabbed a couple of pieces. “Maybe that’s what’s got me so damn interested. Her little church dresses with high collars have me half in love. Did you know she’s a librarian and loves to discuss books? I hardly know what she’s talking about half the time, and all it’s doing is making me want her more.”

“Why don’t you ask her what her favorite book is and then read it, so you can talk about it? Maybe the way to this woman’s heart is through her mind, not her body.”

“I already know that, and since it’s going to take me more than a minute to figure out how to use my brain instead of my body, it’s frustrating.”

“Guess you’ve got your work cut out for you.”

“Don Quixote.”

“What?”

“That’s her favorite book.”

“Damn, the girl has good taste. I read Cervantes in college; that book was over a thousand pages of adventure, risk, and fortitude. The man from La Mancha was a soldier, so you should have no problem relating. Your years in the Marines will make you appreciate what the character went through.”

“Did you say a thousand pages?”

“Give or take.”

“Shit, that will take more than a couple of days to read.”

“Why don’t you grab a copy and then make sure you talk to Jazzy about it each week? At least you know where she is every Sunday, and I bet if you suggest dinner dates to discuss the finer points, she’ll agree. I wager that she’ll be willing to see what your body has to offer by the time you’re halfway through the book.”

Pounding his hand on the desk, he grinned. “That’s a hell of a plan, Kelly.”

“Just call me Dr. Love.”

Cole walked in and looked between them. “Why are we calling my accountant, Dr. Love?”

Terrence stood and slapped Cole on the back. “Cause she’s a freaking genius.” He gave Kelly a wink and then sauntered out of the office.

Seeing Cole’s sour expression made her wonder if he was as uncomfortable as she was about the conversation they’d had on Friday. “What can I do for you?”

“Meet me in my office in an hour.” He held up an envelope. “We got a letter from the IRS and have a date for the initial meeting regarding the audit.”

Nodding, she did her best to ignore the pulse of unwanted attraction. Why did her body always want the ones that would decimate her?

“Why do you look like you swallowed a lemon?” He leaned closer. “What haven’t you told me?”

“Nothing.” Pasting on a bland smile, she wiped away an inconvenient naughty picture. “I have ninety percent of the year in question complete, so you will be ready.”

“We will be ready.”

“Cole, I told you that my colleague has a lot more experience with the process the IRS utilizes during an audit. You have her number and need to call her so that she can represent you in the meeting.”

So I can get out of here before I do something regrettable.

“No! You’re my accountant, and I want you sitting beside me.”

“But I didn’t prepare your return for the year in question, so you should take a tax lawyer.”

He closed the door, taking the seat that Terrence had vacated. “Did the accountant we used screw us, or do you think we’re just lucky, and this is a random audit?”

“As best as I can tell, the guy didn’t screw you. There might be some expenses the IRS considers unallowable, but at the same time, some were not taken. It’s not like you moved income from the business into a shell company and then tried and pass it through a trust.”

“I have no idea what you just said.”

“It’s just a technique that some companies use to avoid paying taxes.”

“We didn’t do that, though.”

“Exactly. The audit will be a long, arduous process, and my best guess is that it will be a wash in the end.”

“So, why do I need someone else?”

“Because I’m not a tax lawyer. I’m a CPA and far from an expert on the audit process.” *And I don’t want to make a bad decision.*

“You’re who I want.” He leaned back. “Are you with me? You seem to be drifting.”

“I’m listening.” Folding her hands, she pretended he was one of the nuns from her high school. “But I think it’s time we end our professional relationship.”

He let out a mirthless laugh. “And why would that be?”

“Our conversation on Friday—”

“Was two people talking outside the office. I’m not worried that the woman who will stand between the vultures and me at the Internal Revenue Service is into kinky shit, and neither should you.”

She leaned forward and hiss-whispered, “I’m not into kinky s.h.i.t.”

“Honey, you were sitting in the bar at the Red Door, and it’s not ‘cause you like the martinis.”

Sitting back, she slapped her hands on the desk. “This is why a continued professional relationship is inadvisable. I don’t need to defend myself or my choices outside the office.”

“And I’m not asking you to.” He smiled. “I’m not judging you and don’t care what you’re into. All I care about is that you’re honest and understand our business. Since you fulfill both requirements, you’re my only choice.” He leaned forward, lifted her arm, and twisted it back and forth. “Cuffs or no cuffs.”

Sliding her arm away from his hand, she sat back. “You should leave before my temper snaps.”

Standing, he knocked on the desk. “Sometimes angry sex is the best kind.”

Before she could respond, he’d walked out, and she was left sputtering. “Asshole!” His head popped back in, and she sucked in a breath.

“Now, for that, we’d need to know one another better and might need to share a meal.” He disappeared, and she let her head fall to the desk as his hyena laugh filled the hallway.

Thank God this was Vegas, and hitmen were a dime a dozen. Sucking in a deep breath, she once again wondered how much it would cost her to get rid of Cole McCallan.

Cole watched his two brothers enter his office, frowning. “What?”

“Why do you insist on pissing off the people who can help us most?” Zach asked as he walked over to the bar and poured drinks.

Seth took a seat and leaned back. “We need Kelly on our side, and saying crazy shit to get a rise out of her is not how that will be accomplished.”

Cole studied his youngest brother and wondered if he was the smartest of the three or just the craziest. Maybe it didn’t matter because he sure as shit had a guardian angel. “Not sure what you’re accusing me of, but I plead innocent.”

Zach handed out the glasses of bourbon and took his seat. “After your meeting, Kelly told the guys she’d pay double for offing you and made sure they understood no price was too high. She also threw in doing their taxes as a bonus.”

He took a drink of his bourbon. “She’s pissed this time because she’s never offered the tax prep thing before.”

“Not something you should be smiling about,” Seth replied. “Did you know one of her besties is none other than Daisy Garcia?”

“The spymaster?” he choked out. “How the hell is my accountant friends with someone so deadly?”

“They went to grade school together. Apparently, their little posse will be in town this weekend to celebrate Kelly’s birthday.”

Zach crossed his legs and set his drink on his knee. “And how did you discover the intel, little brother?”

“I ran into Kelly and Daisy this morning at the coffee place down the street.” Sweeping his longish hair back, Seth smirked. “And when I was in LA a couple of months ago, I worked with Tom Dalton, and his girlfriend is part of the group too.”

He took a gulp of his drink. “Did you get an invite to the festivities?”

“No.” Seth looked between them. “I didn’t really expect one.”

“Gio is hosting the party, and I’m kinda surprised she hasn’t invited me since we’ve spent so much time together over the last year.”

“Sniping at one another.” Zach snorted loudly. “You have a high school crush and are not handling it well. Considering what we’ve got going on with the IRS, it’s unacceptable. Either ask her out like the grown-ass man you are or leave her be. Throwing out inappropriate comments to get a reaction will only blow up in your face.”

“This is like that girl from high school that played him junior year,” Seth said as he snapped his fingers and looked at the ceiling. “Dee or Delilah, something.”

“Danielle,” Zach said quietly.

“Fuck you both for even thinking it, much less saying it. I’ve got the situation with Kelly under control, and this isn’t some sick leftover fantasy from high school.”

Zach held up his drink. “Make sure it isn’t because not only is she a good gal, but we’re not going to let you screw up the business we’ve busted our asses to build.”

Seth tapped his brother’s glass. “I think you and Kelly make perfect sense. She’s your whole good-girl cheerleader fantasy, and you’re probably her bad-boy dream come true.”

Cole turned his chair, looked at the skyline, and ignored the grain of truth his brothers had laid on him. He’d been inappropriate as hell with Kelly. Why hadn’t he kept his promise to himself and quit the shit? He drained his glass, made another resolution, and knew he had to pull it together and treat Kelly respectfully. Nothing inappropriate would pass his lips, no matter how much he liked seeing the spark of interest in her eyes and heat in her cheeks.

He was playing with a flame that would burn both of their asses, and he needed to stop.

“Let’s get out of here and head home,” Seth said as he stood. “I need a swim and some dinner.”

“I’ll grill tonight,” Cole replied as he stood. He looked at both brothers and shoved his hands in his pocket. “Don’t worry; I’ll behave with Kelly and not jeopardize our business.”

Zach nodded and then took their glasses to the wet bar. “Maybe it’s time you nut up and ask her out. You’re clearly interested and should just bite the bullet.”

“Not a great idea, considering I’m not into relationships,” he replied, grabbing his keys and phone.

“Maybe this woman is going to change that. Either way, you need to stop because you can’t keep poking her and not expect to get bit,” Seth added.

He followed his brothers and again vowed to pull his head out of his ass because the last thing he wanted was for him and Kelly to end up with nothing but bad feelings between them.

CHAPTER FIVE



Kelly opened the door to her house. “We deserve a margarita after that match.”

“We deserved one before we hit the court,” Andi commented. “When did you become such a good player?”

“I haven’t dated in a year, so I’ve been playing a lot.”

Daisy dropped her racquet near the door. “We should’ve gone to a spa or something.”

“Quit complaining, ladies. When it’s your birthday, you get to choose the activity.”

Andi dropped her racquet next to Daisy’s. “When are Cecily and Tessa arriving?”

A car horn made them all look up. “Here they are.” She walked out to the driveway with Andi and Daisy following. “This is the best present in the world. “All my posse in one place.”

Andi squeezed her hand. “This is going to be your year, doll. I can feel it.”

“I hope so.”

Cecily got out of the car and ran over to Kelly. “Happy Birthday, gorgeous. I can’t believe we get to go to a sex club for your birthday.”

She hugged her friend tightly. “Thank you for announcing it to the neighbors.”

“Oops.” Cecily looked around. “At least it will up your cool quotient.”

Tessa joined them and gave Kelly a side hug. “We need drinks.”

“I have a pitcher of margaritas in the fridge.” She turned toward the front door and stopped when the Fed Ex delivery truck stopped in front of the house. “Did I do some late-night shopping and forget about it?”

“I hope it’s shoes,” Andi called out.

“Sex toys would be more useful,” Cecily said as she pulled her suitcase out of the car.

She ignored her friends and met the delivery driver at the end of the driveway. “Hi there.”

“Ms. Morris, I need your signature.”

She signed the electronic pad and then accepted a small box. “Thank you.”

“What is it?” Daisy asked, joining her.

“Who would send me something from Tiffany’s?”

“Maybe it’s from the mobster hosting your birthday dinner,” Tessa replied helpfully.

“Open it,” Cecily commanded as she joined the group.”

“Let’s go into the house.” She followed her friends in and knew Gio wouldn’t send something so personal.

Once all the girls had drinks, she grabbed a pair of scissors. “Here we go.”

“Maybe you have a secret admirer,” Tessa suggested before sipping her margarita.

“I doubt it,” she replied, pulling a small blue box out of white tissue paper.

“Is there a card?” Cecily asked.

She pushed her hand into the box and found a small envelope at the bottom. Opening it with shaking hands, she read the card and laughed nervously. “Damn.”

Tessa grabbed the card and cleared her throat. “Some women are not meant to be tamed. I hope you run wild until

you find someone worthy. Have a wonderful birthday, babe. XOXO, Cole.”

“You’re definitely going to fall on that dick,” Daisy announced.

“Who is Cole,” Cecily asked.

“Open the box and then tell us,” Tessa interrupted.

Heart beating, she slipped the white ribbon off and lifted off the lid. “Oh my.” She pulled out a tennis bracelet and held it up. “This is gorgeous.”

“It sure is,” Andi said, wrapping her arm around Kelly’s waist. “Maybe Cupid won’t have to do any heavy lifting with this one.”

“I’ve missed out on a critical story,” Cecily said. “And I need to be filled in.”

Daisy refilled everyone’s glasses. “I’ll get the story started while Kelly calls Cole.”

“I’ll be right back.” She slipped the bracelet back into the box and walked to the patio. The dry desert wind blew across her cheek, and she dialed Cole’s number.

“Did you get your birthday present?”

“Cole, it’s beautiful. But—”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“It’s too much, though.”

“No, it’s not, babe. I’ve spent the last year in your company, and I know without a doubt that it’s the least I could do.”

“I don’t know what to say.” A rich laugh filled her ear, and she smiled in response. “I know it’s a rarity.”

“I might just drape you in jewels if it keeps you from busting my ass every ten minutes.”

“Is that what I do?”

“In the best way possible, Kelly.”

Laughter spilled out of the living room, and she turned toward her friends. “Thank you again. I should—”

“Have fun with your friends. I’ll see you next week.”

“Okay.” The call ended, and she stared at the Red Rock Canyon in the distance. Everything was suddenly upside down.

“Are you okay?” Cecily asked as she stepped out to the patio.

“I don’t know.”

“The snarly boss threw you for a loop, did he?”

“Yes.” She took her friend’s hand. “No one’s ever thought I was untamable.”

“But he does.”

“Yes.”

“I think the man in our lives should consider us a storm. One they would run to and not avoid.”

“My mom would agree and tell us to avoid the nice guys and wait for the good men.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Nice guys are not always nice and can be passive-aggressive, emotionally illiterate, and have no interest in being decent husbands, protectors, or providers. But good men are often savage servants. Confident and capable of standing in the gap and being ferocious. One is a rough ride but totally worth it, and the other is pleasant and far more dangerous because they will screw you with a smile on their face.”

“I’ve encountered far too many of those nice guys, and let me tell you, there was nothing pleasant about the ride.”

“Same.” She followed Cecily back into the house and knew Cole was as ferocious as they came.

CHAPTER SIX



Another day in paradise. Kelly returned to the office she'd been using at McCallan Security and hoped it was one of her last. Mentally checking her to-do list, she realized it wasn't a pipe dream since the prep for the audit was ninety-five percent complete, and the other projects they'd agreed on were finished.

Letting out a long breath, she knew the end of her and Cole's business relationship couldn't have come at a better time. The gift he'd given her sparkled under the fluorescent lights, and she was still unsure why'd he been so thoughtful.

Feeling her head throb, she settled into a chair and tried to focus on the tasks she had to complete. The sooner she could whip through them, the better her chances were of not diving into a fling that would leave her with a pile of regrets.

"Hell of a presentation this morning."

Looking up, she watched Cole drop into a chair. "On a scale of one to ten, how sarcastic are you?"

"Zero." He pointed to the big box of magnum condoms on the corner of her desk. "Your visual aids kicked ass, and the speech about safe sex and economizing truly hit home."

"Why do I feel like you're making fun of me?"

He leaned forward. "Babe, that was the first time in company history that all forty operators were listening."

She let out a laugh. "When Terrence yelled: 'Preach it, sister,' I knew at least one man was paying attention."

"They were all on the edge of their seats." He ran his hand over his pants. "Remind me next time to put you at the end of the meeting. You're a hell of an act to follow, and the guys

weren't even pretending to pay attention when I started my speech."

"Not going to be a problem since it was my last one." She watched him frown as he sat forward.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Did you read the email I sent?"

"Which one, since you send me at least ten a day?"

Letting out a huff, she sat up straight. "The one that outlined all the projects I've completed. I probably have only a few days left on the IRS audit prep, and then I'm done."

"No, you're not."

His bright blue eyes flashed with irritation, and she saw his blunt features tighten. "Cole, when I started working with you, we both agreed on what you wanted to accomplish, and I've held up my end of the deal."

"Then you can be our CFO and make sure that we don't screw things up when you leave."

"You don't need one. Just get someone to help Jared if you pick up another major account, and you should be fine."

"I don't want fine; I want you."

Swallowing, she shook her head. "I appreciate the offer, but—"

"Just because we bicker doesn't mean we're not a great team." He narrowed his eyes. "Are you afraid of what might happen if you stick around?"

"No!" A blazing smile filled his face, and she wanted to howl with frustration. "I'm not interested in a full-time position." *Or colossally bad ideas.*

"Let's go get some lunch and discuss it."

She shook her head. "Thank you, but I'll pass. It would be better if I finished the audit prep."

Standing, he closed her laptop. "Yeah, that's not going to work for me." He held out his hand and wiggled his fingers.

“Get your ass up and come eat.”

“If I hadn’t seen your American Express bill for the last five years, I might think your charm never worked on a woman.” She stood and straightened her dress. “But I’ve seen the bi-monthly flower charges, so I know women out there have succumbed. Though I don’t see how that’s possible.” She pushed his outstretched hand away. “We don’t need to share a meal.”

“Oh, but we do.” He lifted her hand and ran his thumb over the bracelet. “You’re the type of woman that should be draped in diamonds.”

“Cole—”

“We can consider a goodbye lunch.”

Dropping her shoulders, she nodded. “Fine.”

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

She followed him out of the office and remained silent because the last thing she wanted to do was admit that she would miss him and his clean woodsy scent that clung to her clothes for days.

Cole pulled his truck into Ferraro’s restaurant and decided that if she agreed to a meal together, he would make it a long one. Since she seemed to like Fabrizio’s cooking at the Red Door, he knew she’d love what Gino’s chefs created.

“I thought we were going to grab a sandwich.”

“What kind of prick would I be if I didn’t take you out for a nice meal?” When she gave him a fake smile, he decided not to say more and climbed out of his truck. Before he could open her door, she had stepped out. “I was going to get your door.”

“Not necessary.” She smiled, slung her purse over her shoulder, and strode toward the entrance.

Why are you running, woman? He caught up to her in two long strides, opened the restaurant door, and enjoyed her soft curves as she brushed past him.

Once they were seated, he noticed how tight her mouth was. Maybe it was time for her to leave McCallan Security since neither of them would cross the line from flirting to fornicating while working together.

The waiter approached, and he decided to go big. It was time to celebrate the possibilities. “We’ll have the 97 Luciano Sandrone, Barolo.”

“Excellent choice, sir.”

No shit. It was a five-hundred-dollar bottle of wine that he didn’t have very often. Gio had given him a bottle at Christmas for the last couple of years, and he loved it and hoped Kelly would too.”

“Guess this is a celebration if we’re having that with our meal.”

He gave her a wink and then sat back. “Probably should’ve taken you out for a meal sooner, considering how much you’ve done for us.”

“Not necessary.”

Watching her pick up the menu, he wondered if her nerves had anything to do with how close they were sitting. The waiter returned and went through the ritual of opening the wine, and once they had their glasses in hand, he offered his in a toast. “Thanks for saving our asses and helping prepare us for the next surge of success.”

Kelly tapped his glass and then took a sip. “My pleasure.”

He drank some of his wine. “That’s some polite bullshit, but I appreciate the sentiment.”

She set her glass down slowly. “It’s the truth. I love helping businesses succeed. You and your brothers have an impressive company, and the next year will cement your future.”

“I agree and believe we’re right on the cusp of having something that will outlast us and can be passed on to our kids.” Lifting his glass, he studied her and was hit once again by her beauty. She looked a little like Audrey Hepburn but had mischief and fire burning in her eyes instead of innocence. He loved that she stood up to his dominant ass and held her own.

Hell, it was probably one of the top reasons why he found her so damn enticing.

Her smokin’ hot body didn’t hurt, either.

“So, who will be the first McCallan brother to start the dynasty?”

“It should be me, by all rights, since I’m the oldest, but it will probably be Seth. He’s the most optimistic, which is necessary when falling in love.”

“I think you’re right. The whole matrimony thing takes a huge leap of faith, and believing in the concept of happy ever after is probably essential.”

He refilled her glass and topped his off. “Have you ever gotten close to walking down the aisle?”

She lifted the corner of her mouth. “Once.”

“Your face tells me it wasn’t a great experience.”

“It wasn’t fatal, and for that, I’m grateful.”

“For him or you?” When she didn’t respond and lifted her glass, drinking down half of it, he decided to leave the subject alone. He was here to thank her for doing an incredible job and determine if she’d be interested in exploring the possibilities.

He was ready to call a spade a spade and knew the bickering they’d done was just another form of flirting. Whether she would agree with the assessment was a whole other can of beans.

The waiter approached, and he squeezed Kelly’s hand. “Let me order.”

“Why?”

“Because.” Unable to articulate why it was necessary, he hoped she’d allow him to give her what he knew she’d enjoy.

“Fine.”

He kissed her hand gently, watching her eyes flare with surprise. “Thanks, babe.”

“What would you like?” the waiter asked, focusing entirely on Cole.

“We’ll start with the frito misto, then have a couple of Caesar salads, and for our entrée, we’ll both have the pappardelle mimmo and finish with torte all’olio.

“Perfect.”

He watched the man walk away and turned back to Kelly. “The pasta was created by Gino’s son, and it’s got scallops, lobster, and asparagus in some kind of crazy sauce that’s freakin’ amazing.”

“Sounds great; I better let Gio know I won’t be joining him for dinner tonight because I’ll need to go home and pass out after this.”

Feeling a sting of jealousy, he did his best not to let it show. “You never answered my question; do you and Gio have a thing?”

“We thought about it for a minute or two, but both decided it would never work, so we’re just friends and business colleagues.”

“Interesting.”

“Your expression’s telling me you find it no such thing.”

“You and a mafia guy don’t compute. You’re a straight-laced, rule-abiding woman, and I can’t see you with a man who owns sex clubs and will eventually inherit the family crime business.”

“First off, they’re adult entertainment clubs, and I’m not a prude, nor do I judge how people spend their time and money. And second, he’s not going to inherit his father’s crown. His younger brother Eduardo is going to take over.”

He held up his hands. “Thanks for clearing that up.”

“You don’t know anything about me, so don’t make assumptions.”

“You’re right. Why don’t you fill me in so I can make informed ones from now on?”

“Why do you want to get to know me?” Looking out at the room, she let her finger tap on her wine glass.

Nice tell. His interest made her uncomfortable, making him think she was interested too. A fact that was probably pissing her the hell off since she likely wasn’t into bad boys. Not that he was one anymore, but he sure as hell wasn’t a rule follower.

And the woman loved rules.

“I’ll start with an easy question; what brought you to Vegas?” Their appetizer was delivered, and he took the silver fork and served each of them some of the fried calamari, shrimp, and fennel.

“I came to Vegas when I was promoted to manager by KPMG. I started in the Arizona office after graduating college and spent a lot of time here as part of the audit team.”

“Vegas doesn’t seem like it would be your first choice. What made you decide to accept the position?”

“I like the city and thought it would be a great place to figure out who I was and what I liked.”

“And what have you discovered?”

“You really want to know?”

“Why are you busting my balls? If I’m asking, then I want to know the answer.”

“All we’ve done is bicker since I came to work for you, and we rarely get personal with one another, so it seems a little weird.”

“It’s not weird.” Her mouth twisted, and he knew it was time to lay it on the line. “I think we fight because it’s easier than admitting we want to—”

“Don’t say it, Cole. Not if you value your life.”

“I was going to say kiss.”

She let out a laugh. “You’re such a liar.”

He poured more wine into her glass and winked. “Now, you’ll never know.” She lifted her fork and speared a shrimp, and before she put it into her mouth, she gave him a smile that broke his chest open. “Since you’re so intent on leaving the company, I think it’s time we see about the chemistry we’ve got.”

“Who says it’s chemistry?”

“You want to play that game or cut the bullshit and admit we’re both curious?”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“It’s not horrible either, so just think about it.” He decided not to say more when she drank her wine and kept her mouth shut. He’d planted the seed, and now he needed to be patient.

Eventually, they were going to dig into this thing between them. No matter how complicated it would make things.

How, when, and where was up for debate. But at some point, he would have his mouth on hers and discover once and for all if she tasted as good as he imagined. “Since you don’t want to talk about kissing, tell me what you like to do in your free time.”

And the floodgates opened as she began talking about things she enjoyed. Lifting his arm, he draped it over the back of the booth and relaxed as her voice settled something in his chest.

Something he hadn’t known existed.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Cole closed his laptop and checked his watch, groaning when he saw it was past nine. Just another crazy Saturday night in Vegas for the head of McCallan Security. Leaning back in his chair, he rubbed his face. He'd gotten a ton done and felt better about the upcoming meetings scheduled for Monday and Tuesday with the UFC.

They had a shot at handling security for the MMA fighters who came to town and the celebrities who attended the events at T-Mobile Arena. If the company was chosen for the job, they would act as a backup for the personal security celebrities brought, ensuring the organizations' interests were protected.

Due to several incidents over the last year, the company wanted to ensure they had themselves covered. And he was ready to show the UFC team that McCallan Security was the only answer.

This was the next level for their business, and he was ready to catapult them into the stratosphere.

His phone buzzed, and he saw that it was Gio Zanetti. "What the hell?" Sliding the bar, he answered. "Talk to me, Gio."

"Where are you?"

He didn't like the tone and wondered if shit had gone sideways at the club. "At the office."

"I've got a situation, and I'm calling you because I know you have a vested interest based on our conversation last week."

"Okaaaay."

“Kelly was roofied, and she’s in my office passed out. I’d rather not send her home with one of my guys because she’ll freak the hell out. I’d do it, but I need to find the man responsible.”

Jumping out of his chair, he grabbed his keys and locked the office door before Gio could say more. “Call the paramedics, and I’ll be there in ten.”

“I have an in-house physician assistant; he’s checked her out, and she doesn’t need the ER. Her heartbeat is strong, and she’s not in danger.”

He opened the door to the stairs and jogged down since he didn’t want to waste time on the elevator. “How the hell did this happen?”

“That, my friend, is the fucking question of the night. I’ve got my guys going through the feeds. Once we determine who’s responsible, we’ll run him through the facial recognition program you installed and take care of it.”

Hitting the bottom floor, he jogged out to the parking lot. “I’d ask that you save him for me, but know you won’t give me the pleasure.”

“Kelly is very important to me, and this is personal, so I’ll handle the situation myself.”

He climbed into his truck and pulled out of the parking lot. “Is your guy confident she’s not in danger? Maybe I should take her to the ER just to be on the safe side.”

“Trust me; if she was in danger, she’d already be in my family’s facility. I’d never take a chance with her or anyone else who’s a guest of my club.”

“I know. This situation just pisses me the hell off.”

“Imagine how angry I am.”

“What the hell was she doing in your bar anyway? I thought she only stayed after your meetings on Fridays?”

“We worked this afternoon, and she stayed for dinner.” He cleared his throat. “She doesn’t have a ton of friends in town and is uncomfortable going to clubs by herself. At least here,

she knows we've got an eye on her and will handle anyone who steps out of line."

Turning onto the main drag, he let out a breath. "In a screwed-up way, I get that."

"If you would just do something about your feelings, then she'd be with you on weekends and not need to sit at my bar chatting up strangers."

"If you wanted to kick me in the balls, you could've just waited until you saw me in person."

Gio let out a laugh and then groaned. "I wanted to make sure you got the message. I adore this woman, and I'd like her to be happy. It won't be me, so it might as well be you."

"Fuck you, Gio." Another bout of laughter filled his ear, and he decided it was the best he could hope for. "Should I park in the back?"

"Yeah, I'll have Sal wait for you, and then I'll take you to my office."

"Roger that, I'm less than a quarter click away."

"Whenever you get stressed, you speak military."

He ended the call without responding and pulled into the back lot of the Red Door. As he climbed out of his truck, he took a long breath and let go of the anger roiling in his gut. Now wasn't the time to think about the person responsible. He needed to focus on Kelly and the tough night ahead. The only saving grace was she'd likely not remember any of it in the morning.

Letting out a mirthless laugh, he stalked toward the back door and knew she would lose her shit when she woke up in his house.

An hour later, Cole leaned against the wall in his bathroom and wiped Kelly's face with a wet washcloth. She'd

finally lost everything in her stomach and was starting to shake. Holding her close, he tipped a water bottle to her lips and watched her take a small sip. “Not too much.”

Groaning, she curled into a ball. “Just let me die.”

“No such luck, babe. We’re going to have to ride this one out.” Running his hand over her hair, he noticed it was sticky. Good thing she wasn’t going to remember any of this because he knew she’d be mortified.

A wave of tenderness filled his chest as he looked down at his bedraggled accountant, which surprised him. He was used to feeling lust, frustration, and admiration, but this new soft feeling was confusing.

He’d never felt anything remotely like it and wasn’t sure what to make of it. Rubbing his hand across his chest, he felt a tightness near his heart and wondered if it would become a regular thing.

Feeling Kelly move, he loosened his hold and watched her sit up. “Ready for bed?” Her eyes were slightly unfocused, and he figured she was still under the influence. His experience as a medic in the Marines didn’t help when it came to roofies, so he wasn’t exactly sure how long it would take for the drug to clear her system.

“Shower.”

“In the morning, Kelly.”

“No!” Slowly standing, she grabbed the counter and frowned at her reflection. “Now.”

Standing, he watched her whip her dress over her head with more dexterity than he thought possible. “Fuck me,” he mumbled.

She was a hundred times better than he had ever imagined.

And he was a dick for noticing.

But what the hell was he supposed to do? Kelly Morris stood inches away, wearing nothing more than pink cotton underwear and a matching bra.

He couldn't move, couldn't breathe.

And sure as hell couldn't form a coherent thought.

Every fantasy he ever had was embodied in the woman frowning at herself in the mirror.

His kryptonite was a good girl with a curvy body and smart mouth, and here she was.

Not that he could do anything about it.

He wasn't a complete asshole.

"Babe, let's get you into bed, and you can clean up in the morning."

She lifted a strand of hair and made a face. "Not possible." Taking unsteady steps, she moved toward the shower, then stopped, thrusting out her hand. "Toothbrush."

It didn't look like she would be talked out of it, and the last thing he wanted to do was pick her up. Having that soft body against his wasn't a torture, he felt like putting himself through. "Babe—"

Her head flew around, and she threw him a dirty look. "Can't sleep without a shower and brushing my teeth."

Letting out a huff, he grabbed a new toothbrush from a drawer and put toothpaste on it. She snatched it out of his hand and started brushing. "You are so stubborn." He moved past her and flipped the shower heads on when she rolled her eyes.

Bending over, she rinsed out her mouth and then straightened up. "Better."

A smile lifted the corners of her lips, and he was surprised by how satisfied he felt. "Do you have your balance?"

Letting out an un-ladylike snort, she took a step and swayed. "Never better."

"Yeah, right." Following her into the shower, he accepted that he was screwed and prayed for mercy. He watched her step under the water, and the tiny cotton scraps covering her body immediately became transparent.

Which proved two things: one, there was a God, and two, he had a hell of a sense of humor because the temptation before him tested every ounce of decency he possessed. Getting turned on was wrong on a million different levels, but what the hell was he supposed to do?

Debating furiously with himself, he decided that standing there salivating would only ensure his place in Hell, so he stepped back. "Call me if you need me." He started to turn and saw her list to the left and immediately put his arms out and caught her just in time. "Sweet Jesus, that was close."

He looked down and saw her eyes close as she tightened her hold on his shoulders and smiled. And even though she was trashed, it was one of her good ones. Feeling the weight of his wet clothes, he laughed and knew karma had finally come to call.

Lifting her into his arms, he did his best to ignore how amazing she felt as her soft, wet, warm curves pressed into his chest. He sat her down on the bench and let out a breath of relief.

Better.

Except her eyes were closed.

Shit. He couldn't leave her and have her pass out.

"I'm going to Hell, no doubt about it." He leaned against the wall and peeled off his jeans and T-shirt. Grabbing the shampoo, he washed her hair as quickly as possible and tried to keep his eyes away from her luscious breasts.

Knowing he was doing a crap job, he grasped the detachable showerhead from the wall and tilted Kelly's head, rinsing the shampoo.

Why the hell was his heart beating so fast?

Sure, she was a beautiful, desirable woman, but certainly wasn't the first one he'd ever seen naked. This was Vegas, after all, and he'd taken advantage of all it had to offer over the years and knew more women intimately than he could recall. But this one... was doing funny things to his emotions.

And it was a lot more than carnal desire.

“Cole—”

“Yeah, babe?”

“Don’t forget the conditioner.”

A bubble of laughter erupted from his chest, and he wasn’t surprised she could give orders even when she was half in the bag. “Okay, conditioner coming up.”

He squirted some in his hands, massaged it into her scalp, and felt her head fall forward and rest against his chest.

There had never been a better moment in his whole life.

The intimacy that swirled around them in the steamy enclosure had his heart battering mercilessly, making him wonder if a heart attack was imminent.

Had he finally gone soft?

Unable to answer, he finished with her hair and decided there was no way he would run the soap over her body. If she wanted to bitch him out, she could, but he was a man, not a machine, and he’d hit his limit.

Flipping the water off, the sudden silence was deafening. He cleared his throat, lifted Kelly into his arms, and stepped out. Setting her down, he peeled off her wet panties and bra and did his best not to stare.

Which was impossible.

Every dream he’d ever had about a perfect woman was before him in human form, and he couldn’t do a damn thing about it.

Wrapping her in a towel, he lifted her and tightened his hold as her head fell against his chest. Her soft breath brushed across his skin, and the situation in his wet jockeys hit critical mass.

Clearly, this was God’s way of punishing him for all the sins he’d committed over the years.

Or a way to reward him for the good things he'd managed.

Either way, he was suffering.

He walked over to the bed, flipped the covers off, and deposited her gently against the sheets. The towel covered her sufficiently, but he knew it wouldn't stay in place, and if she woke up naked, then hell would break loose.

Stalking to his chest of drawers, he pulled out two T-shirts and a pair of athletic shorts. He changed quickly and then got Kelly into a T-shirt, out of her towel without losing his mind or his load, and let out a strangled breath.

He'd take a direct-action mission in Karbala over what he just managed since it would've been much easier.

He scooped up his wet underwear, entered the bathroom, picked up their wet clothes, and headed to the laundry room. Once he got the load going, he walked into his living room and stared out the window. He loved the view of the city lights and let the familiar sight calm his nerves.

Deciding that a shot of bourbon couldn't hurt, he walked over to his wet bar and poured himself two fingers. He opened the slider, stepped out to the patio, filled his lungs with the dry desert air, and thanked God he'd been around for Gio's call.

Hearing something, he stepped back into the house, set his drink down, and headed back to his room.

"What happened? Where am I?"

"Babe, I'm right here." He got into bed and took her hand. "You're okay; just sleep."

"Cole?"

"Yeah?" No response, just her fingers tightening around his. His chest constricted further, and he slid down, shoving a pillow under his head. "Guess we're sleeping together."

Closing his eyes, he prayed she didn't kill him in the morning when she woke and discovered she had no panties. There was a damn good chance she wouldn't remember a

thing, and the questions she would have wouldn't be much fun.

He took a long breath, looked over, and noticed that the moon slicing through the shades made her even more beautiful.

This woman would eventually own him, and it was up to him how easy the process would be.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Opening one eye, Kelly felt her head pound and wondered how one martini had knocked her on her hiney. Feeling something solid and warm beneath her arm, she opened the other and gasped. Why was she draped over Cole McCallan?

She closed both eyes immediately, said three fervent prayers, and hoped it was all a dream. Did she get black-out drunk and sleep with the man who'd been the star of her fantasies?

And not remember?

Slowly opening both eyes, she looked around the room and then at the man sleeping peacefully. His massive chest rose and descended gently, and she did her best not to lick her lips.

God, he was gorgeous.

The tattoos on his arms were as intricate as the ones on his neck. She thought about studying them but knew she should probably make her escape instead.

Sliding her arm slowly off his chest, she hoped he wouldn't wake up. When his breathing didn't change, she let out a silent hallelujah. Now, she'd be golden if she could just get off the bed, grab her clothes, and find her car.

Moving toward the edge, she felt the bed dip and glanced over, seeing Cole's smile.

Guess the sex must've been decent since he didn't look disappointed. Too bad she couldn't remember anything. "Morning."

"Morning," he croaked. "How do you feel?"

“Head is pounding.”

“Do you remember anything?”

“Uhhh—”

Sitting up, he ran his hand over his chest, and she dug deep into her brain to see if there was any flicker of a recollection.

Nada.

Leaning up on her arm, she studied his face to see if there were any clues. “The last thing I remember is having a drink at the Red Door and listening to a man tell an excruciatingly boring story about his trip to Antigua.”

“You were roofied, and Gio called me.”

She sat up and felt a sharp pain in her head. “What?”

“Some asshole roofied you, and Gio didn’t want to send you home with one of his guys, figuring you’d freak out. So, he got in touch, and I brought you home.”

“I got roofied?” she asked again as she stood. Feeling the T-shirt flap against her bare behind, she pulled it down and felt her face heat. “How did I lose my panties?”

“Well—”

Covering her face with her hand, she groaned. “Just tell me.”

“After you threw up a bunch of times, you insisted on having a shower and stripped down to your skivvies. They got soaked, so I took ‘em off you after we got out of the shower.” He stood, stretching his hands over his head. “I’ll go throw them in the dryer.”

The throbbing in her head increased, and she felt like she was about to fall over. Swaying, she covered her mouth and ran to what she hoped was the bathroom. Once inside, she slid down against the wall and covered her face.

There had to be a lot more to the story, and she wasn’t sure if she wanted to hear the gruesome tale or just live in blissful ignorance.

Thank God she was almost done with her work at McCallan.

Burying her face in her arms, she wondered how long she could stay in the bathroom. When there was a soft knock on the door, she knew it wouldn't be long enough. "Be out in a minute."

Cole opened it slowly, walked in, and shook his head. "Didn't take you for a coward."

Tucking the T-shirt around her legs, she sat up and squared her shoulders. "I'm not; I'm just gathering my composure and taking a minute to process."

"You're hiding in the bathroom."

"Am not."

He collapsed next to her and moved her around until he tucked his arm around her shoulder. "Yeah, you are!"

"I'm mortified; is it too much to ask for a few minutes alone?"

"You have nothing to be embarrassed about." He tugged her closer and let out a huff. "Some asshole gave you shit so he could do God knows what, and you're worried about what I think?"

"No, well...maybe a little."

He kissed her head. "Not sure what kind of world you grew up in, but that's some crazy shit."

"We're business colleagues, not friends. Not only did you nurse me through the night, but I apparently threw myself at you. If that doesn't call for a wee bit of regret, then I don't know what does."

"We *are* friends, Kelly, and you're kind of like my work wife, so last night wasn't a big deal."

"That is such a lie." She fiddled with her rings and then scrunched her eyes closed. "I'm sure you had some plans, and watching me throw up wasn't part of them."

“I was working when I got Gio’s call, and the only thing I had planned was ordering a pizza and catching some games.” Looking down, he grinned. “Instead, I saw my hot accountant in her pink panties and matching bra, so it wasn’t a total loss.”

Covering her mouth, she started laughing and looked up to see his eyes dancing. “Guessing you saw a lot more than that.”

“Yeah, like I said, not a total loss.”

“Did I try and kiss you or anything else embarrassing?”

“You really don’t remember anything?”

Closing her eyes, she shook her head. “No.”

She felt his hand on her face, and she looked over. When his bright blue eyes sparked with mischief, she sucked in a breath. “Just tell me.”

“No kissing. But you are a hell of a snuggler and like to hog the covers.”

She let out a slow breath. “Okay, I can live with that.”

“And if you had kissed me?”

“Cole, forcing yourself on someone is never okay, and it would take me a long time to forgive myself if I’d done anything to make you uncomfortable.”

“Babe, if you puckered up, there would be no forcing. We both know there’s an attraction between us, and I’m ready to see what it means.”

“Well, that’s very—”

“Interesting, hot, hard to resist, or the best damn idea you’ve heard in ages?”

“Dangerous.”

“The best stuff in the world usually is.”

“Mmmm.” Closing her eyes, she rested her head against the wall, let his words roll around, and decided her brain was too fuzzy. “If I could borrow a pair of shorts, I’ll call an Uber and get out of your hair.”

“Yes to the shorts, but I’m not letting you get in an Uber. I’ll make some breakfast and then take you home later.”

“Cole, you’ve done more than enough, and once I send you an obscenely expensive gift basket, we can both forget this.”

“Kelly, don’t be silly. I don’t need a gift basket or anything else.” He stood and held out his hand. “I’ll grab a pair of shorts for you, and then you can park your ass on the couch and drink coffee while I put together some food.”

“Turn around.”

“What?”

“Turn around; I can’t get up without flashing you.”

“Babe, I saw all your business.”

“Doesn’t mean you need to see it again.” She waited until he did as she asked and then quickly got up. “I should go home.”

He slung his arm over her shoulder and guided her out of the bathroom. “Not before we get something in your stomach and see if it stays down. The effects of the drug can last twenty-four hours, and I’m keeping you here until I know you’re okay.”

“That is more than kind, and I appreciate it, but—”

“This is not the hill you want to plant your flag on, babe.”

Moving out of his hold, she slid her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes. “I will plant my flag wherever I want and will not be dictated to by the likes of you.”

“There’s my girl; I knew you were in there someplace.”

She dropped her hands and hung her head. “Why do you always poke and prod until I lose my temper?”

“Because I like your fire and hate the professional mask you always try to keep in place. I’d rather have you irritated than give me fake, polite bullshit.”

“It’s called being professional and behaving like an adult.”

He leaned in and lifted her chin. “As I said, I much prefer when your tail is twitchin’ and you’re about to spit fire.”

“I’m your accountant, not your—”

“Lover?”

Feeling her head throb, she rubbed her hands against her temples. “I think—”

“Coffee. Let’s get a cup in us before we continue this conversation.” He walked over to a chest of drawers, pulled out a pair of shorts, and held them up. “You’re going to swim in these, but it’s all I have.”

She took them out of his hand. “I’ll just roll the top.”

“Roger that.” He gave her a wink and then walked out of the room.

Letting out a sigh, she pulled the shorts on and prayed she could escape before the lover subject came up again. He’d hinted at it on Friday, and she wasn’t ready to deal with it.

No matter how obscenely sexy she found him.

Taking Cole McCallan on as a lover was the equivalent of getting into a pool of sharks.

Dangerous and more than likely deadly.

She knew he was a man who went through women as quickly as she went through paper towels, and she wasn’t interested in being part of the parade. And it was a hell of one if all the charges on his corporate American Express account were any indication.

He seemed to have a new girl every two weeks and always followed the same pattern. It would start with several excellent meals, then move on to nights at the clubs. After that, it was something from a lingerie shop and, when it all ended, a lovely arrangement of flowers.

Very neat and tidy.

And meaningless.

Not what she was interested in. It was time for a real relationship, and until someone came along who wanted that, too, she was keeping her knees crossed and her panties on.

Walking out of the bedroom, she pushed her hair over her shoulder and decided whatever work she had left to complete for McCallan Security would be accomplished from her home office.

She and temptation needed to stay away from each other, and spending time with Cole wouldn't make that possible.

Cole heard footsteps and watched Kelly enter the great room. How was the damn woman still appealing after spending most of the night losing her cookies?

Handing her a cup of coffee, he smiled and watched the fake one she gave him in return. The cloak of propriety was back in place, and he could see she was dying to leave. Which wasn't going to happen because if they didn't get over the awkwardness now, they never would.

"Thank you, Cole." She looked around, walked over to her purse, and dug out her phone. "I appreciate everything, but I'm going to head out."

He stalked over, took the phone out of her hand, and shoved it in the pocket of his shorts. "We'll have breakfast, sit on the patio, and read the paper. After I'm convinced you're okay, I'll take you home."

Her cheeks reddened, and he knew he was pushing but didn't care because he wouldn't let her turtle. "Scrambled or fried?"

"What?"

"How do you want your eggs?"

"You are so pig-headed."

“Quit trying to sweet talk me.” He took her hand, led her to the island, and pulled out a chair. “Drink your coffee.”

“If you give me one more order, I can’t be held responsible for my actions.”

“You don’t scare me, woman. Go ahead and give me what you’ve got.” He watched her eyes narrow and felt a hundred times better. He could take her mad; he couldn’t stomach her polite, fake shit. “Gio had your car delivered to your house last night and has taken care of the man responsible for slipping you the drug.”

Her eyes flew up. “What does taken care of mean?”

“Not sure. When he texted me this morning, he only said the situation had been handled.”

She covered her eyes and rested her head against the granite. “That makes me feel very uncomfortable.”

“The guy was going to do God knows what to you, so he got what he deserved.” When she raised her head and frowned, he shrugged. “I’m sure you’re not his first victim, so think of how many women out there have been assaulted and how many will now avoid it.”

Shivering, she wrapped her arms around her body. “I haven’t processed it yet, and that certainly puts it in perspective.”

The color drained from her face, and he didn’t say more. Not that he didn’t have plenty to share, because he sure as hell did. Including a long lecture about going out by herself. But that was a conversation that would have to wait.

Her phone buzzed, and he pulled it out of his pocket and saw it was a text from a man named Lawrence. What a sissy name, kind of like Allen. Where the hell did she find these men? Clearing his throat, he watched her head raise and handed her the phone. “Text.”

She grabbed it. “Guess I should cancel my tennis game.”

“Not a bad idea, considering you were drugged less than twenty-four hours ago.” He watched her type a response and

nodded. *Bye, Lawrence!*

Tennis, what a sissy game.

What kind of man ran around a court and hit a yellow ball? Not a real one, that was for damn sure. Turning around, he opened the fridge, started pulling out food, and thought about Kelly in a short tennis skirt. Now that might be something worth seeing.

“Do you have Terrence’s phone number?”

He set the food down on the counter. “Of course I do.”

She lifted her phone with her fingers poised over the keyboard. “Go ahead.”

“What do you need it for?”

“So I can confirm our date.”

“What the hell?” he roared.

Laughter erupted from her mouth, and she rocked back in her chair. “That was too easy.”

Leaning over the counter, so their faces were close, he waited. “Let me know when you’re done.”

She wiped her eyes. “Ms. Clara never brings her phone into church. So, I want Terrence to let his mama know I will not be there today. She’ll have to get someone else to help with the coffee and donuts, and I want to give her time to find volunteers.”

“Oh.”

“Why would you care if Terrence and I are—”

He put his fingers over her mouth. “Don’t.” She nipped his finger, and he felt an instant reaction in his shorts.

Devil woman was teasing him.

He’d been harder than a bat for the last ten hours and didn’t need her playing with his control. “I’m going to ask you to play nice.”

“Fine.” She picked up her phone and wiggled it. “Give me the number because I don’t want them shorthanded after

services.”

He rattled off the number and watched her smile as she texted his friend. Several minutes later, she was still typing, and he didn't think there was that much to say about coffee and donuts. When she finally finished, he bit his tongue and didn't ask.

“I hope he follows my advice.”

“What's that?” he asked, cracking eggs into a bowl.

“I gave Terrence some suggestions for his conversation with Jazzy today, and I'm hoping it works.”

“Is that the church woman he's interested in?”

“Yes, and she's beautiful inside and out.” Standing, she walked around the counter and washed her hands. “I want to help.” She took the cheese out of the package and started opening drawers. “Where is your grater?”

He pulled one out of a jar next to the stove and handed it to her. “Here, babe.” Standing side by side, they prepped the fillings for the scramble, and he enjoyed their companionable silence.

It wasn't anything he'd ever enjoyed with a woman and realized it would be great if Kelly changed that.

Feeling a hip bump, he looked down and noticed she was trying to get in the drawer he was standing in front of. “What do you need?”

“A paring knife. I want to dice the red peppers smaller.”

He opened the drawer, watched her select one, inspect it, and then cut the peppers into smaller squares. Why it didn't bother the shit out of him, he couldn't say.

Pulling out a pan, he set it on the stove and knew the size of the peppers wouldn't be the only thing changing. Which meant he should embrace it instead of fighting it like he usually did and see if there was something good on the other side.

Seeing Kelly smile told him there was probably more than a bit of happiness he could grab ahold of. All he had to do was convince her it was possible.

CHAPTER NINE



Kelly walked toward her house after she finished her run and saw Gio's Maserati parked in her driveway. They had spoken on Sunday, and she wasn't sure why he was visiting at eight on a Wednesday morning. Considering his days didn't end until three in the morning, he should still be asleep.

Once she hit the driveway, he stepped out of the car and looked as fresh as someone who'd just slept eight hours. "Good morning."

"Buongiorno, Cara."

Leaning back when he leaned in, she waved her hand. "I just ran a few miles; you don't want to get close."

Gio held her shoulder and kissed her cheek. "A little sweat can be just what a man is looking for."

"You certainly are a flirty birdy this morning."

He gave her a careless shrug and closed his car door. "Make me a coffee and prove you've fully recovered from Saturday."

"Is that why you're here, or are you checking to make sure things are on track for the new club?"

"Is that what you think of me?"

"No, I'm just trying to make light of the situation."

He touched her lower back and guided her to the front door. "Which is why I came to make sure that you're okay. Being drugged is not something to take lightly, and I'm not talking about the physical. There's an emotional component that can't be ignored."

“I’m fine on both counts.” She pressed her hand to the pad next to the door and heard a car horn. Turning, she saw her friend Lawrence. “Let me say a quick hello and make sure he still wants to play tennis this afternoon.”

“Kelly, make no mistake, the man wants to do much more than that.”

She opened the front door and waved him in. “Go, and I’ll be up to feed you in a minute.”

“Words a man loves to hear.”

“You have a lot of women that would trip over themselves for the privilege, and all you have to do is choose one.”

“But none that I’m interested in.”

“I’ll give you some of your own advice and suggest you widen your horizons.”

“I’ll do it the moment you do.” He tipped his head toward the car. “That preppy blond man couldn’t make you happy if I drew him a diagram.”

She let out a laugh and pushed him into the house. “I’ll be back in a minute.” Shaking her head, she walked down her driveway as Cole’s face popped into her head. Now that was a man who’d never need a diagram for anything.

Sighing, she dismissed the thought, knowing she wasn’t yet brave enough to risk her heart.

Kelly stood in front of the kitchen window that looked out at Red Rock Canyon and heard the gurgle of her stovetop espresso pot. Turning, she saw that Gio was waiting. “Eat before it gets cold.”

“Come sit, and I will.”

She took the pot of coffee over to the island, slid into a seat, and poured them a coffee. “*Mangiare.*”

“So bossy. Are you sure you’re not Italian?”

Laughing, she dug into the frittata. “Irish and Spanish.”

“That’s why you and Cole are the perfect answer for one another.”

She dropped her fork and wondered why Gio was playing Cupid. “Can you repeat that?”

“You and Cole – a match made in heaven.”

“Or hell. We bicker as often as we agree, have completely different lifestyles, and probably have different goals.”

“Those are just excuses.” He pointed his fork at her. “You two have chemistry. I saw it at the club several weeks ago and know it doesn’t come along often. It’s time you faced it and give in, so you can see if he’s the one.”

“I’m not sure we have—”

“You do, and we both know it.” He gave her a sad frown. “I thought last weekend would allow you two to quit fighting what is and put yourselves out of your misery.”

“That’s not going to happen in this lifetime or the next!”

“So stubborn.” He ate his food quietly and mumbled to himself. Once he cleared his plate, he wiped his mouth carefully and picked up his cup. “Please, don’t tell me that you want to marry a boring executive or that horrible, beige man, Lawrence, that stopped by.”

“I do not.”

He drank his coffee. “Then I was right, and you and Cole are perfect for one another.”

“It’s not an either-or situation, and Cole is not a man who is interested in more than a week or two.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I certainly do because American Express statements don’t lie.”

Throwing back his head, Gio laughed. “For a second, I forgot that accountants know as much as priests.”

“Forget, priest. Try doctor.”

“So, you don’t want a safe man or one that might be dangerous.” Leaning his elbow on the island, he waited. “What exactly do you want?”

“Passion, decency, and to love deeply. I’ve had a year of men who want nothing more than a night or two, and I’m ready for something real. I’ve had all the appetizers I can stomach and am ready for the full meal.”

“A worthy thing to desire. Don’t settle and promise me you’ll hold out until a man loves you deeply enough so that risking his own sanity is a price he’s willing to pay.”

She tilted her head. “Is something like that even possible?”

“I hope so because I’m not settling for less. I know there’s a woman out there that can handle my life, and until I find her, I will remain happily single.”

“I bet there’s more than one, and all you have to do is choose.”

“I think you only get one in a lifetime.”

“Maybe.”

He picked up the coffee pot and filled his cup. “I thought calling Cole on Saturday would allow you to see him as a knight in shining armor.”

Leaning back, she let out a chuckle. “You are not going to let this go.”

“Well...was he?”

“Yes, he was very kind and went above and beyond the call of duty.” Gio’s hand covered hers, and she looked up. “What?”

“He may not look like the picture you had in your head, but perhaps you should give him a shot.”

“He’s not a man who does relationships, and considering that’s what I’d like to have, it seems silly to think we could have something.”

“That may not be true. He’s been in my club since Sunday reviewing all the security his company has put in place and added many new protocols. He’s as upset as I am about the incident and doesn’t want me to allow you to sit at the bar if he’s not there.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Maybe, but I get it.”

Standing, she cleared the plates. “You grew up in a powerful crime family; I’m not sure you’re the best person to be commenting.”

Gio stood. “Fair enough. I was raised with all kinds of antiquated ideas, and many of them are still with me.” He put on his suit coat and took her hand. “Are you *really* okay?”

She straightened his tie and patted his chest. “Every woman knows the risk of getting drugged in a public setting, and I’m lucky that I wasn’t alone when it happened.”

“We are doing everything we can to ensure it never occurs at the Red Door again.” He checked his watch and frowned. “I’ve got to go.” He kissed her and then headed toward the stairs. “Think about what I’ve said.”

“Yes, Cupid.”

He gave her a wink. “Will I see you tomorrow?”

“Yes, I should be there in the afternoon.”

“Perfect.”

She watched him walk down the stairs and then returned to the kitchen. Why was he so adamant about Cole being a viable contender?

They were opposites in almost every way, and while the sparks could be entertaining, they certainly weren’t anything she needed on a daily basis.

No matter what her lady bits were campaigning for.

Cole flew down Warm Springs Road on his bike and felt the warm wind against his face. Riding in the early evening was his favorite, and his field trip to Kelly's was a perfect excuse to get out of the office.

She'd been MIA all week, and he was about to find out how long she planned to hide. They still had a few things to complete, and he sure as shit wouldn't be doing it over email.

He pulled into her subdivision and noticed the people with their kids and dogs enjoying the early evening. The sound of his Indian motorcycle caused a few heads to turn, and he nodded to those who stopped to stare.

His bike was a beauty, and he didn't blame anyone for gawking. As he pulled onto Kelly's street, he saw her standing next to a man dressed in tennis whites. "Hell, to the absolute fucking no."

Pansy ass boy with a sweater tied around his shoulders wasn't going to be making moves on his girl. And, yeah, he'd been thinking of her that way since she spent the night at his house.

In less than a minute, he had his bike parked and was at her side. "Hey, babe."

"Cole—"

"Did you miss me?" Her eyes flared, and he knew it was a crap statement but didn't care since the last thing he would do was give the blond-haired tight-ass a chance to make a move.

Risky?

Damn straight.

He put his hand out. "Cole McCallan." He waited a half-second for the dude to shake, then firmly pumped his hand.

"Lawrence Williams."

Crowding Kelly, he put his hand on her lower back. "How was the game?"

"Kelly's a great player, and we had a close match."

“Nice.” Feeling Kelly stiffen under his hand, he knew he had about another minute before she blew. His audacity undoubtedly had her knickers in a twist, but she was too well-mannered to do anything about it, and for once, he appreciated it.

“I should get going,” Kelly said as she stepped away from Cole. “Thanks for the game, Lawrence.”

“Absolutely. Let me know what time you want to play Saturday. Maybe we can grab dinner afterward.”

“I think—”

“She won’t be able to make it since it’s the company’s barbeque.” He moved closer and slid his hand around her waist. “Good night, Lawrence.” Feeling a sharp elbow dig into his stomach let him know he would be in deep shit the moment the preppy prince left. A fact that bothered him very little.

“I’ll call you later in the week,” Kelly said as she stepped away.

“I look forward to it.” Throwing Cole a glare, he opened his car door.

Cole waved and stood behind Kelly with his hands on her shoulders. “That’s your type?”

Spinning around, she punched him in the arm. “You are such a pig.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” Thankfully, she laughed. “It was my duty to save you from a man who wears a sweater tied around his shoulders.”

“Maybe that’s what I like.”

Covering his mouth, he snickered. “Babe, we both know that’s what you’re trying to avoid.”

She crossed her arms, giving him a slow once-over. “And a man in jeans and a leather jacket with tats is my dream man?”

He held out his arms. “I’m hoping so.”

She pushed at his chest, and he captured her hand, closing the space that separated them. “Too much fire between us to think otherwise.”

Looking up, she narrowed her eyes. “I’m not interested in getting burned.”

“Sometimes, getting close to the flame isn’t a choice.” Not able to hold himself back, he ran his finger over her soft cheek and noticed her pulse pick up speed.

“What are you doing here?”

“Came to flush you out since you haven’t been in the office all week.”

“I’ve been sending you spreadsheets via email; have you read them?”

“I glance at them, but I’ve been waiting for you to come in.”

“You don’t need to see me in person.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” The last of the evening light allowed him to see the pretty flush on her cheeks, and he prayed it was because they were snuggled up tight. “Let’s go grab some dinner.”

“I can’t; it’s Blue Apron night.”

“What the hell is that?”

“Dinner in a box.” Moving out of his embrace, she picked up her tennis racket. “Would you like to join me?”

“Did you just offer to make me dinner?”

She let out a sigh. “Yes. It’s the least I can do after you took such good care of me on Saturday.”

“Babe, I’ll always take care of you. All you have to do is let me.”

“Have you been drinking?”

He took her hand. “No! Why are you being so prickly?”

“Because that’s what we do with each other, and you’re acting weird.”

“I am not, and don’t start a fight just because you’re uncomfortable.”

“We always fight.”

He led her toward the front door. “Not anymore. We’re laying down the swords and using the fire between us for something else.”

“Are you hoping that something else includes kissing?”

“Definitely. I’ve been dreaming of your pink panties since Sunday, and the sooner I can see them, the sooner my sanity will return.”

She disengaged the lock and walked in. “If that ever happens, you can kiss your sanity goodbye.”

Knowing she was probably right, he decided to leave the subject alone. His jeans were already uncomfortable, and he didn’t need to make the situation worse.

They ascended the stairs to the upper level, and he appreciated how her tennis skirt flapped against her thighs. “Nice house.”

“Thanks. It took me a while to get used to having the bonus room and garage on the first floor. I like it now, though, since I have great views on the second and third levels.”

He looked out the kitchen window and saw the sun setting against Red Rock Canyon, then turned toward the living room and admired the lights from the strip in the distance. “You sure do. Reminds me a lot of what my brothers and I have.”

“What made you guys buy houses on the same street?”

“We like hanging out together and wanted to make it as easy as possible.”

“Makes sense.” She walked over to the fridge and pulled out a beer, a bottle of wine, and a small blue box. Opening the beer, she handed it to him. “So, what are you doing here other than pissing on the hopes and dreams of my tennis partner?”

“I missed seeing you.” He watched her pour herself a glass of wine and take a healthy sip. “Better?”

She lifted the glass and shook her head. “Not even close.” She took another sip, opened the box, and laid out the ingredients. “Chicken Wonton Noodle Stir-fry.”

He sipped his beer, realizing she wasn’t ready to admit she missed him too. He picked up the card with a picture and recipe and studied it. “This gets delivered to your door?”

“Yes, twice a week, and I love it because it allows me to try new things and not get lazy about cooking.”

“This is not a bad idea.” He handed her the card and watched her read the instructions. “Are you interested in Lawrence?”

“He’s a friend, and we enjoy hanging out.”

“The guy wants to be a hell of a lot more than a friend.”

“After the show, you put on tonight, he may not.”

“Are you really mad or just slightly irritated?”

“I’m confused more than anything.” Arranging the ingredients in a line, she shook her head.

“About me lifting my leg and marking my territory?”

“Yes!”

He walked around the island. “I want to start something with you, Kelly.”

“Like what?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure. All I know is that I’m tired of fighting my attraction and would like to see what would happen if we—”

“Had sex, hung out, fought like hell, and broke each other’s hearts?”

“I thought we could start with dinner and go from there.”

A smile broke across her face, and he took her into his arms and hugged her tight. “Let’s take it a day at a time.”

“I don’t know, Cole. Anything between us would be complicated.”

“Think about it; that’s all I ask.”

“Maybe.”

He kissed her head and then stepped back. “Give me that recipe card, and let’s make this chicken stir-fry ‘cause I’m hungry.” When she lifted her eyebrow, he decided not to clarify what he was hungry for since he didn’t need her any more skittish than she already was.

CHAPTER TEN



Cole reviewed the spreadsheet and knew they needed another ten men. WME-IMG, the company that owned the UFC, signed the contract for their services. McCallan Security would now handle the fighters' and high-value fans' security needs.

McCallan Security was officially a success.

Which meant the company barbeque at his house tomorrow would be a hell of a celebration.

He ran his hand over the signatures on the five-million-dollar agreement and thought back to his senior year of high school when a counselor told him he wouldn't amount to anything.

Guess he proved that guy wrong.

"Cole."

Looking up, he saw Kelly leaning against the door with files in her hands. "What's up, babe?"

"I'm all done."

Motioning her in, he watched her walk across the marble floor and bit the inside of his cheek. She was temptation incarnate in her pink dress and heels. She placed the folders in front of him and then took a seat. "So, that's it?"

"Everything is prepped for the meeting with the IRS, the new accounting software is installed, and Jared is ready to handle the new systems."

"I'd ask you to stay again, but I've decided that ending our professional relationship is a good idea." Her lips pressed together, and he knew she was confused by his words. "I don't

mix business with pleasure and would like to see if you're interested in moving our chemistry out of the office and into the bedroom."

"You say that like I've somehow led you to believe that's possible."

Leaning forward, he raised an eyebrow. "I know you're not ready to say the words, but your body already has."

She folded her arms across her chest. "I have done no such thing."

Standing, he slowly walked around his desk and noticed her foot was jiggling. "Don't worry. I won't take a bite out of you." He walked over to the wet bar and mumbled, "Yet."

He filled two glasses with bourbon and knew he was ready to give this thing between them everything he could. Returning, he handed her a drink and then held out his hand. "Come sit with me on the couch and toast our successful partnership."

"Fine." She pushed her hand against his chest as she stood. "Don't crowd me."

He took her hand and laughed. "I know you like it when I get up in your personal space, so don't pretend otherwise."

"That is a lie."

She sat on the couch, and he noticed her dress had a nice high slit hidden in the full layers. He glimpsed her tan legs as she crossed them and told himself to behave. "Do you have a new client to replace us?"

"I have two. A dry cleaner with six stores and a woman who opened a second retail store."

Taking her hand, he ran his finger over her soft skin. "What kind of retail store?"

"Clothing."

Her cheeks flushed, and he didn't know if it was the bourbon, his hand, or something else. "What kind of clothes?"

“Lingerie.” Moving her hand away, she smoothed out her dress. “I’ll give you the address, so you can shop there when your relationships hit that point.”

Sitting back, he blinked several times. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

She took a sip of her drink. “I notice that you buy your ladies’ lingerie right before you end things and send them a lovely flower arrangement. Maybe you can give Genevieve some of your business. I know she’d appreciate it.”

“I do no such thing.” When she gave him a mocking smile, he felt his spine stiffen.

“Cole, I just reviewed your last five years of financials, and you have a pattern. Every two or three weeks, you do the same thing: first dinners, then clubs, a little lingerie, and finally flowers.” She patted his leg. “All very tidy and predictable.”

He took a sip of bourbon and thought about her words, knowing she was right. He’d never taken a moment to think about it, but he was damn predictable.

“The store’s name is Kiki De Montparnasse, and it has some beautiful pieces. If you want your woman to tease, ease, or please, they have what you’re looking for. She even has fitting rooms that accommodate couples, so if you want a private show with your next lady, it’s possible.”

His frustration unfurled like a flag. “What the hell are you talking about?” Scraping his hand over his face, he scowled. “I’ve been talking about us starting something, and you just gave me a five-minute speech about my next lady.”

Kelly set her drink down firmly. “I’m a practical woman and know you go through women bi-monthly. All your talk about kissing is nonsense. At most, you want a night with me, so you can work out some good girl fantasy.”

Heat suffused his body, and he stood, draining his drink. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Kelly stood and fisted her hands. “I sure as hell do.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I’m a curiosity to you and

nothing more. I doubt I'd even last your usual two weeks because, after one night, the thrill would be gone."

He took a step closer and saw the pulse flutter in her neck. "You are talking out of your ass."

"You take that back right this moment."

Kelly's cheeks were pink, her eyes were dilated, and he didn't know if she would hit or kiss him. But he wasn't backing down. "I want a hell of a lot more than two weeks with you, and the fact that you piss me off as much as you turn me on lets me know we could be a hell of a match. Yours is the voice I hear in my head during the day and the opinion I care about. Not to mention the body that fills my fantasies. There isn't a part of you I'm not interested in, so the sooner you get that through your thick skull, the better."

Closing the space that separated them, he took her in his arms and felt her tremble. "Maybe I can be your bad-boy fantasy." Tension drained from her limbs. "Bet you never got naked with a delinquent."

Her soft laughter brushed against his unsettled nerves, and his heart sped up. "Maybe it's time you gave a man who looks like he'd be all wrong a chance."

"Cole, you're not a delinquent. You served this country for ten years in the Marines, have a very successful company, and treat your employees well. You may think of yourself as a bad boy, but all I see is a good man."

There was that damn soft feeling again. How the hell did she keep breaking him wide open with so little effort? Unable to handle the emotions, he pushed her chin up with his thumb and lowered his mouth.

It was time to show her what they could be.

The moment his lips touched hers, a bolt of blistering heat shot straight to his cock. He tightened his hold and nipped at her lower lip, sliding his tongue inside.

This was no sweet first kiss; this was a 122mm explosive. Her hands slid along his neck, and he responded by wrapping

her long hair in his hand, so he could control her mouth's slant and the kiss's depth.

Their tongues tangled deep and wild. Growling with a need to get closer, his appetite flared out of control as their mouths mated.

He wanted more.

Hell, he wanted everything.

But it wasn't going to happen in his office.

He ended their kiss with one last slow, thorough lick inside her mouth and a bite to her lower lip that made her gasp. "God damn, babe."

Their heavy breaths filled the room, and he watched her sway on her heels. Wrapping her in his arms, he felt her head fall against his chest. "If that doesn't tell you this thing is on, then I don't know what will."

"Cole—"

"No way to deny the chemistry, so don't even try."

"I don't want to be blown up, so I can damn well deny whatever I want."

Leaning back, he looked down into her face and was surprised to see genuine fear. What the hell did she have to be frightened of? He was the one that wouldn't survive. "The thing is, we don't really have a choice."

She pushed his chest and stepped back. "I think we want very different things, and this," she moved her hands between them, "curiosity is bound to end in disaster."

"You don't know what I want, so why don't you try asking before you make grand predictions?"

She wrapped her arms around herself. "I want the real deal." She looked up and held his gaze. "I don't need another fling. I've had a year of them and am ready for a real relationship. One that could end in marriage if things work out. You know...kids, minivans, soccer games, the whole nine yards."

He shoved his hands in his pockets. “Not sure I’m ready for that.” Her head bobbed up and down, and she didn’t look pissed or surprised. Just resigned, and that bothered the hell out of him. “But, maybe—”

“Don’t blow smoke or lie; you’re better than that.” She lifted her arm and checked her watch. “I should get going; I have plans this evening.”

“What kind of plans?”

“None of your business.” Taking a step back, she smiled. “The kiss was great, and if I was interested in one night of bliss, you’d be at the top of my list.” She put her hands in the pockets of her dress and then took another step back. “I wish you the best.”

He watched her leave his office and found he couldn’t move his feet as her words bounced around in his head. Was he ready for kids and minivans?

He didn’t think so and didn’t want to lie. Because he was many things, but dishonest wasn’t one of them.

The kind of commitment Kelly wanted wasn’t something he’d likely be ready for any time soon, which meant he needed to stay away. The woman deserved everything, and wasting her time or making false promises wasn’t something he’d do.

He stalked over to his couch and sat down. Looking up at the ceiling, he groaned loudly and ran his hands over his face.

He was gut-punched and knew he likely let his best chance at happiness walk away.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Zach asked as he walked in.

Letting his head fall forward, he studied his brother. “I’m screwed.”

“Does it have anything to do with the beautiful accountant that just walked out with a stiff smile?”

“Yeah, it sure does.”

“You want to talk about it here or head home and drink about it?”

Letting out a laugh, he stood and collected his and Kelly’s glasses. “Let’s head out.”

“Where is Seth?”

“He’s making sure the security plan is in place for the pool players’ National Singles Championship over at the Westgate Resort.”

“It’s starting on Sunday, right?”

“Yeah, and they’re expecting a thousand people.”

“How thin are we going to be if something comes up?”

“We’re covered.”

He set the glasses next to the wet bar and headed to his desk. Looking at the UFC contract on his desk made him realize that success and money didn’t mean shit if you had no one to share them with. Even if you weren’t ready. “I’ve got to fix this thing with Kelly.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

He flipped his brother off, picked up the contracts, and slid them into his file drawer. Pressing his hand to the pad, he heard the lock engage. “She’s not playin’ and doesn’t want to waste her time on something that has no hope of going somewhere.”

“Why is that a problem?”

“Because I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“Then why did you go after her in the first place?” Zach leaned against the chair and crossed his arms. “Did you think she’d be interested in a week or two? Because if that’s the case, you’re not as smart as I thought.”

“I didn’t have a timeframe in mind.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Fine, I thought we’d last a couple of months until we got tired of one another.”

“You two have been fighting for a year; if there was a time stamp on the attraction ending, it already would’ve happened.”

Looking up, he realized his brother was absolutely one hundred percent correct. In some ways, they were already in a relationship. All that was missing was the sex and fun.

They’d worked side by side and were a hell of a team. They fought, made up, fought again, and together they’d put everything in place to ensure the company would succeed for years. “Zach, you’re a genius.”

“I know. But what did I say specifically that made you see it?”

“Kelly and I have been in a *relationship*, and I didn’t even realize it. I wonder how much groveling it’s gonna take to get to the good stuff.”

“If you start with a ton and then keep going, you might have a small chance.”

Grabbing his keys and phone, he grinned. “Let’s get out of here and come up with a plan, then.”

“Roger that.”

He slapped his brother on the shoulder and followed him out of his office. Feeling a thousand pounds lighter, he promised himself he wouldn’t give up until he and Kelly gave the thing between them a real shot.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



The sound of the timer bounced off the kitchen walls, and Kelly grabbed the oven mitts before pulling the cupcakes out. She pressed her finger gently to the largest one and decided they were done. “Good Lord, what have I done?”

Surveying the crowded countertops, she knew that she’d gone a bit overboard. She moved aside the banana bread, slid the hot pan next to the cooling scones, and thought about who to pawn her baked goods.

She checked the clock, saw it was nine-thirty, and decided it was late enough to call her sister. After the facetime call went through, she waved. “Morning, Annie. Rise and shine.”

“Are you still drunk?”

“No!” She sipped her lukewarm coffee. “I was asleep by nine and have been up since four.”

“That’s sad, considering you live in a city that never sleeps.”

She studied her sister’s face and knew Anne was having more fun in Ventura than she was in the epicenter of sin and frivolity. “How are you?”

“The more important question is, how are you? Your island is filled with cupcakes and scones, so someone must’ve pissed you off or broken your heart. Considering you haven’t told me about any man, I’m guessing someone got the best of you.”

“It’s neither.”

“You know lying will only come back to bite you in the ass.”

There were people in the world who would accept whatever you told them without a second thought. Unfortunately, her sister wasn't one of them. Beneath Anne's elementary school teacher facade lay the soul of a CIA agent who'd get to the truth no matter the cost. "I pushed a man away, and I'm unsure if it was the right thing to do."

Her sister's face filled the screen. "I know it wasn't boring Lawrence, so who was it?"

"Cole McCallan."

"The man who runs the security company?"

"Yes."

"The one you've fought with from the moment you started working together and has a body only an angel could resist with a mouth so dirty he'll never be let in church?"

"Yeah."

"Damn, sister, I thought you two would end up in bed."

"I must talk about him more than I realized."

"Duh."

She ran her hand over her face. "That's upsetting."

"No, it's not. I think he's the first man you've been unable to manage. Which means I'd love to meet him."

Sitting back, she picked at the corner of a scone and nibbled on it. "That makes me sound awful."

"Nah, it just means you're a force to be reckoned with, and most of the men you encounter are too lazy to bother. They'd rather go along to get along and thus avoid you and your disapproval."

"And why is this the first time you've shared this observation?"

"I may still be drunk and have loose lips. Or...I see your sad face and know this Cole person means more than you've admitted to yourself."

“He’s all wrong, and it would never work, so I’d like to avoid the crash and burn if I can.”

“Why don’t you just marry one of those boring men who agree with you and get it over with? Or just dig your own grave and crawl in because it would pretty much be the same thing.”

“You are still drunk!”

“The drink will set you free, and I’m laying the truth on you whether you’re ready or not.”

“I called you to catch up and get a little sister-love.”

“No, you didn’t.” Annie shook her head. “I’m one of the few who will tell you the truth, and you need to hear it. Did you use the relationship word and scare him off?”

Leaning back, she drank her coffee and stared at her sister over the rim of her mug. “Get out of my head.”

Anne pursed her lips. “Sorry, no can do.”

Kelly ran her finger through a glob of icing. “I may have used the age-old tactic and given him the kids and a minivan speech. But he balked, so I got my answer.”

“Let me guess, you gave him a sad superior smile and walked out of the room like a goddess surrounded in a cloud of self-satisfaction. Which kept you all warm and cozy until you got home and drank a bottle of wine and ate a bag of popcorn while watching *Outlander*.”

“So!”

Anne put her hands up. “I’m not judging. I’d just ask you to consider if it got you any closer to what you want. Dick is everywhere, but chemistry isn’t, and I’d hate to see you pass it up.”

“He kissed me.” Again, her sister’s face filled the screen.

“And?”

“I could live the rest of my life happy with just the memory of his lips on mine.” Covering her mouth, she sucked

in a breath and felt her chest tighten. Saying something like that aloud made it real, and that was the last thing she needed.

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah, that about sums it up.”

“So, what’s our next move?”

Turning, she looked at the island. “I thought I’d make a pie.”

“Uh-oh.”

“What else can I do?”

“Maybe tell him how much you liked the kiss.”

“Yeah, I don’t feel like driving a knife into my heart, so I’ll pass. If I give him an opening, he’ll have me on my knees howling at the moon in pain within a week.”

“As long as you’re keeping things in perspective.”

They each sat back and drank their coffee silently. Until Anne’s latest man walked behind her in all his morning glory. No wonder her sister had such a big smile. “I’ll let you go.”

“Why? We’re not done talking.”

“Your man looks like he needs some attention.”

Anne turned around and laughed. “Kevin, be careful with that thing. You could poke my eye out.”

“Bye, sister. I love you; have fun.”

“Love you. Be brave.”

Laughing, she ended the call before seeing more of Kevin than his doctor had probably ever had. She drained her coffee cup, checked the cupcakes, and decided they were cool enough to frost. As she tasted the frosting, she thought about her sister’s words and decided she’d need a lot more than bravery to have a fling with Cole.

Like a lobotomy and a healthy supply of antidepressants for when it ended.

Neither of which she had on hand.

Cole pulled up to Kelly's house and hoped she was home. It was ten, so he figured he had a good chance of her being around. Lifting the enormous bouquet, he jumped out of his truck and cleared his throat.

His heart was beating, and his gut was churning the same way it had when he and his platoon hit Nasiriyah as part of the first wave of American troops. Striding toward the front door, he decided the chance of fatality was about the same.

He hit the doorbell, stepped back, and wondered why he smelled pie. Before he could come up with an answer, the door swung open, and Kelly stood before him.

Looking like a hot mess.

Her hair was in a messy bun, flour-dusted her cheek, and she wore an old T-shirt with acid green boxers. There was not a more beautiful woman on the planet. "Morning."

"Morning."

He pushed the flowers toward her and waited until she took them. "I screwed up."

"How?"

Her brows were drawn together, and he wondered if she would let him in. A bell rang inside the house, and she let out a huff. "Come on in."

The house smelled like a bakery, and his stomach growled as he watched her run up the stairs. He trailed her, and when he hit the top step, he saw a kitchen island filled with his favorites. "Looks like you've been busy."

"I like to bake," she said as she pulled a pie out of the oven. Setting it carefully on the counter, she stood back and inspected it. "Not my best crust."

"Damn, lady, is there anything you can't do?"

Turning, she swiped her hair off her neck. “What?”

He walked over to the island and sat close to the cupcakes. “Beautiful, smart, and can make cupcakes. You’re a triple threat.”

“Are you drunk?”

Letting out a laugh, he picked up a cupcake and peeled back the paper. “No, babe.”

She lifted the bouquet and smiled. “These are lovely. Is the official end of our relationship?”

“No! What the hell are you talking about?”

“You always send flowers when you’re done with a woman. Though why you decided to deliver them yourself doesn’t make sense.”

He shoved the cupcake into his mouth, deciding it was better than kissing the shit out of her until she saw what he did. When she handed him a cup of coffee, he nodded and wiped his mouth. “That’s one of the best cupcakes I’ve ever had.”

“The secret is coffee. I add a little to the batter because it enhances the flavor of the chocolate. Also, the batter is a lot moister than what’s traditionally used for cupcakes.”

“You’re a genius because I could eat ten of those.” She gave him a fake smile and bent over to grab something from a cupboard. Leaning back, he enjoyed the view of her ass hanging out of her boxers. A blessed thing for a Saturday morning.

He sat up and picked up his coffee cup when she started to straighten. “Did you make these for the barbeque this afternoon?”

She gave him a confused look as she filled a vase with water. “No, I wasn’t planning on going.”

“Well, change your plans because everyone is expecting to see you. It would be rude not to show up.”

Arranging the flowers carefully, she snorted. “No one will miss me.”

“I will.”

Turning, she slid her hands onto her hips. “Why couldn’t you just leave it? We kissed, we fought, and it’s over. There is no rehashing that needs to be done.”

He stood and moved around the island. “Oh, there’s rehashing, and we’re not over.”

“We never started, so you’re right. We scratched an itch and kissed. It’s no big deal; let’s just forget it and move on.”

“Can you?”

“What?”

“Forget how incredible that kiss was. How it rearranged the stars in the sky and gave us a true north.”

Her hand flew to her mouth, and she stepped back, bumping into the counter. “I don’t think—”

He pressed his fingers to her mouth. “Don’t lie because you’re better than that.” When her green eyes flashed, he enjoyed using her words. “I was an idiot for saying that I wasn’t ready for a relationship since we’ve been in one since we started working together.”

She pushed his fingers away. “We have not.”

“Oh, yes, we have. All we’re missing is the hot sex and fun.” He took her hands and held them. “Which we can fix the moment you’re ready.” He grinned. “In fact, tonight would be great.”

Silence. It was a blessed thing sometimes. The dead quiet in the room probably wasn’t one of those times.

“We are not in a relationship.”

“Uh, yeah, we are.” He held up his hand. “One, we have spent more than half our time together over the last year and have not killed one another. Two, we regularly disagree yet

still manage to come up with a solution that makes us both happy. And third, we care about one another and have the other's best interest at heart."

"That's a very distorted view of the facts."

"We're not arguing to see *who's* right; we're discussing *what's* right, and there's a whole lot of *right* about us."

Her shoulders dropped, and he knew his point hit home. "Kelly, relationships scare the hell out of me since I've never had a great one. But I'll do my best if you want to give this a shot."

"Cole—"

"What, babe?"

"I used the r-word to scare you off. I knew it wasn't your thing, and since you terrify the crap out of me, I thought it would be the perfect answer. Women know the best way to get rid of a guy is to talk about marriage and kids, so I did that."

"No shit?"

"Works every time."

"Why do you want to get rid of me?"

Brushing her foot back and forth across the wood floor, she shrugged. "My sister thinks it's because I can't manage you."

He leaned against the counter and folded his arms across his chest. "Interesting."

"It's cowardly."

"A little, but I get it. You like your preppy princes because they'll never give you much trouble, the same way I like fun-time girls who don't want more than a couple of weeks together."

She looked up, and his breath hitched when a smile broke across her face. The one that lit her up from the inside out and hit him in the chest. "What say we dig deep, give one another a shot, and see what happens?"

“That’s crazy talk, Cole.”

“Living on the edge is where all the good stuff happens.”

“I like the middle where I know what to expect.”

He stepped into her space and held her close. “Babe, it’s time we both got out of our own way and see if we can give each other a little happiness.”

“That’s not a great idea.”

“Maybe, but we’re going to do it anyway.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.” Her soft body pressed into his, and he decided Saturday mornings with Kelly would be essential to his happiness. No matter how complicated it could become.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Kelly checked the time as she drove up to Cole's house and knew she was right on the edge of being rude. The party had started hours ago, and the only thing ending her internal struggle to show was that he would've dragged her out of her house. He'd called every hour for the last four, and she knew his threats were not idle.

Parking down the street from his house, she heard her phone ring. Hitting the button on her dash, she answered. "I'm here, Cole."

"Did you park in the driveway?"

"No, why would I?"

"Because that's your parking space."

"What?"

"I'm coming out and will repark your car if you don't put your car in the driveway."

"Bossy men do not make me happy."

"Yeah, we're going to change your opinion on that."

Before she could respond, he hung up. "The nerve." She turned off her car, looked up the street, and saw Cole come out of his house. He wore board shorts with a black tank top, and it was all she could do not to drool. Sweet mother of sex appeal, there wasn't a more desirable man on the planet. Admiring his tanned muscles, she swallowed and knew his frown indicated he wasn't playing.

Which meant the only reasonable thing to do was not encourage him. She got out of her car, pulled out the tray of cookies, and walked toward him. Steam was coming out of his

ears, and she didn't care because she wasn't a woman who could be ordered around. "Hey."

"I see we're starting nice and easy."

"Don't tell me what to do."

"Don't be stubborn just to make a point." He put out his hand. "Keys."

"Really?"

"My woman doesn't park down the damn street; she parks in the fucking driveway like a normal person."

She stopped in front of him and jutted out her hip. "I'm not your—"

"Oh, yes, you are. You want a relationship, so that's what we're damn well having." He leaned over and covered her mouth with his.

Her lips automatically parted beneath the pressure, and his tongue swept inside for a devouring kiss. Moaning, she felt the tray between them and pulled away. Looking into his ice-blue eyes, she blinked. "I'm not sure—"

"Yes, you are." He kissed her head. "And I am too!" He took the tray from her hands. "I'll take this in and then move your car."

"How very stubborn of you."

"Get used to it." He looked her up and down. "It's kind of like looking in a mirror, isn't it?"

"Very funny." She followed him into the house and heard the noise of the party. "Did everyone make it?"

"Almost. We're just missing four guys who are covering the personal protection assignments we've got. They'll be relieved in a couple of hours and show up later."

"Did you tell everyone about the UFC contract?"

"Yeah, the team was psyched. I wish you would've been here when I made the announcement."

"I'm not a part of the company, Cole."

“But you’re part of me, so in a way, you are.”

She walked into the house and decided it wasn’t a point that needed to be argued. The house was filled with people she knew, and she felt immediately comfortable. She had gotten to know most of them reasonably well over the last year, and she considered many of them friends.

Which made Cole’s words ring in her head; maybe she was more a part of them than she realized. She watched Cole set the dessert tray down and return to her side. “Where should I put my purse?”

“In my bedroom.” He put out his hand and wiggled it. “Keys.”

Looking up, she saw his expression and put them in the palm of his hand. “Happy?”

“Very.” He kissed her firmly. “Is your bag in the back seat?”

“What bag?”

“The one I told you to bring.”

“I’m not spending the night.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Yeah, you are.”

“If you’d like to live long enough to enjoy one of my cookies, I suggest you quit telling me how it will be.”

“Fine, but me keeping my mouth shut doesn’t change the facts.”

“You keep talking, Cole, because I brought my checkbook and know at least five men in this room will do what I ask for the right price.”

“Not if I get to them first.” He kissed her again and stepped away before she could say more. Watching his fine behind saunter away, she groaned.

Terrence joined her. “Love ain’t easy.”

“Good thing I’m not loving anyone then.”

“Girl, for such a smart woman, you sure are dumb. You and the boss are all but head over heels for each other, and the sooner y’all accept it, the better.”

“How are things going with Jazzy?” Looking up, she saw an indecent smile light up her friend’s face. “Did you take my suggestion?”

“I sure as hell did. We’ve had two coffee dates this week, and we’re having lunch after church tomorrow.” He rocked back on his heels. “She feels it’s important that I truly appreciate Cervantes, so she sits nice and close as we discuss the book.”

“I’m so happy for you two.”

“Thanks for the suggestion.” He bent down and kissed her cheek. “I think this woman could be it for me.”

“Don’t be kissing my woman,” Cole barked as he strode up.

“I’m not your anything.”

Terrence looked between them and shook his head. “You two are donkeys; I’m out.”

Shaking off Cole’s arm as he tried to wrap it around her waist, she let out a huff. “What has gotten into you?”

“I don’t know.” He looked around the crowded room. “I’ve never been this possessive of another person in my life. It’s as uncomfortable as hell, but I can’t seem to make it go away.” Taking her hand, he tugged her closer. “I want to mark you somehow so you quit resisting me.”

Looking up, she saw his frustration. “Quit pushing, and I’ll stop resisting.”

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

He let out a long breath. “Okay.”

“See? That wasn’t so hard.”

“If you say so.” He brushed his lips over her cheek and nodded toward the table filled with food. “Are you hungry?”

“Absolutely. Did Rollin’ Smoke cater the food?”

“Yes, and there’s plenty of it.”

“Good because it’s my favorite.” Feeling his hand move to her back as they crossed the room, she wondered if they would survive one another.

Cole sat on the patio that overlooked his pool and glanced at Zach. “Hell of a party.”

“Absolutely,” Zach said as he drained his beer. “With the second UFC contract, it couldn’t have come at a better time.”

“Now, all we have to do is find ten men to join us, and we’ll be set.”

“We should look for some women, too. With the high-value fans the UFC attracts, there will be situations where having women on the team will be necessary.”

“Good point.” Seeing Kelly walk past, he wondered if she was going to swim. He had his answer when she pulled her dress off and dropped it on a chair. “Don’t look.”

“Not possible,” Zach replied with a laugh.

Seth strolled up with three glasses of bourbon and let out a whistle. “Damn.”

“Close your eyes,” Cole said with a low growl.

“No way,” Seth replied.

The sun descended and washed Kelly in a soft yellow haze as she stood at the pool’s edge. Her curvy figure was backlit, and her red bikini looked like it was on fire. No longer able to resist, he stood. “You two should go home.”

“But we haven’t finished our drinks,” Zach said.

“Take them to go ‘cause I need some private time with my girl.”

“You claiming her?” Seth asked.

“Yeah, I sure as hell am.”

“About damn time,” Zach replied as he stood. “Seth, do you want to watch the game at my house or yours?”

“Yours since mine is farther.”

“Don’t let the door hit your asses on the way out,” Cole said as he stepped toward the pool and watched Kelly dive in.

Following her in, he swam after her, and they both crested the water at the same time. He planted his feet and pulled her close as she pushed her hair out of her face. “We’re finally alone.”

Looking around, she put her hands on his shoulders. “Where did your brothers go?”

“Home.”

“I thought they were going to hang out for a while.”

“I told them to leave.” Running his nose along her cheek, he felt her tremble and knew it wasn’t because she was cold. Their bodies were flush, and there was no mistaking the effect she had on him. He was as hard as a bat and considering his size, there was no way she didn’t know how she affected him.

The sexual tension between them had gotten stronger as the afternoon wore on, and he prayed she was ready to do something about it.

Desire and lust swirled through his veins, and he wanted nothing more than to show her how willing he was to make her happy.

All she had to do was surrender and allow him the privilege of doing everything he could to make her dreams come true.

Hoping it was possible, he licked his lips and tried to memorize how perfect her soft curves felt pressed against his aching cock. “Are you ready?”

Nodding, she looked up, and the last of the evening light allowed him to see the desire in her eyes. Her tempting lips parted, inviting him to taste her sweetness, and he groaned. Her breaths came quickly, making her breasts lift and quiver as the anticipation escalated. “Can we start this thing between us?”

Exhaling, she let out a shuddering breath. “Might as well, considering you won’t give me a moment’s peace until you get your way.”

He bent his head so their eyes were level. “Mind telling me what I did to get you to agree?”

“You gave me a little room and kept your hands on me at the same time.”

“Is that something I’m ever going to understand?”

“Not likely.”

Lifting her mouth, she pressed their lips together, and a feeling he never knew existed exploded in his chest.

Control slipping, he locked gazes and knew she could see his overwhelming need. Feeling exposed and vulnerable, he gripped her tighter and fused their mouths, taking possession of her in a hard kiss.

When she melted into his hold, it settled something deep in his soul and lit the fire of need flaming between them. Lifting his mouth, he sucked in a breath. “Going to need to take this inside because the filthy things I’m about to do to you are best done in private.”

“How filthy?” she asked with a laugh.

“Enough to get us arrested in at least three states.” Holding her tightly, he walked toward the beach entry of the pool.

“I can walk, Cole.”

“I like having you in my arms.”

She ran her mouth over his chest and pressed a kiss to his skin. “This macho man thing may have advantages I’ve never

considered.”

“Babe, when you’re on your fifth orgasm, you’ll know for sure.”

Her head popped up as he walked into the house, and he saw her disbelief. “What?”

She patted his chest. “I’d be happy with one.”

Grinning, he took long strides down the hall. “You’re going to pass out from all the pleasure I’m about to give you.”

He watched her close her eyes as she buried her face in his neck and laughed.

And for the record, nothing had ever sounded sweeter.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Cole walked into the bathroom, set her down, and let his hands slide off her body for what felt like the first time that day. He'd kept her within a handspan from the moment she walked through the door, and she knew it was his way of showing that he wouldn't give up the hunt.

A development she was coming to love since it made all the years of men's ambiguity seem unimportant. Deep in her heart, she loved that he was coming for her and likely wouldn't stop until he succeeded.

"Shower or bath?" Cole asked with a growl.

Blinking, she wondered if it was a trick question. "I thought we were going to—"

"We have all night, and the last thing I want to do is rush." He ran his finger slowly down her stomach. "I've thought about this privilege for a long time and want to feast on you one achingly perfect moment at a time."

"Then I guess we should start with a shower."

"Perfect," he replied with a devilish grin.

The single-minded intensity he uttered those words with warned her that whatever she was in for was bound to be more than pleasant. Goosebumps skidded across her skin, belly flutters filled her stomach, and heat pooled between her thighs.

She stepped back and let her eyes slowly graze over his body. "You've seen me, but I haven't seen you." Lifting her hand, she rested it on the tab of his board shorts. "May I?"

"Never ask, babe. Take it because I'm here to make your dreams come true."

Pulling the tab, the sound of the Velcro separating bounced off the walls, and she let out a nervous laugh. She slid her hands against his warm hard abs and pushed the shorts over his hips, sucking in a breath when his erection came free and bobbed eagerly in greeting. She'd suspected he was well endowed, but seeing his girth and length left her breathless.

“You okay, babe?”

She ran her hands slowly over his length and heard him growl as his hips moved in response. Feeling him pulse in her hand, she swallowed hard. “I feel like I over-ordered and won't be able to handle what's been served.” His rich laughter filled her ears, and she saw his blue eyes dance. “It wasn't supposed to be funny.”

“You make me so freaking happy.”

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “Thank God because I can't even pretend to be cool about this.”

“If you could, then I'd worry this didn't mean as much to you as it does to me.”

She ran her hand down his face. “Not possible.” Feeling his strength, she enjoyed his big warm hands on her hips as he slowly pushed her bikini bottoms down and knew this would be a night to remember.

“This is how we're going to spend our free time for the foreseeable future.”

“In your bathroom?”

“Naked.”

Letting her fingers play over his corded arms, she traced his tattoo. “I don't have any objections.”

“That's good news because it's going to take more than a minute before I'm sated.”

“So, you want this to happen more than once or twice?” she asked as his thumbs lazily grazed over her breasts, making her nipples pebble hard enough to ache.

“A day? Absolutely!” Lifting her, he deposited her on a chair in the corner. “Look what you do to me,” he muttered, running his palm up and down his erection. “Spread those legs, babe, because I want to see that pretty pussy of yours. I only got a peek last week, and I need to get my face in there and get acquainted.”

Feeling shy, she watched him stroke himself and decided it was silly. Slowly opening her legs, she watched him lick his lips as he got down on his knees.

“So pretty,” he murmured.

He spread her wide open with his big hands and blew a warm breath on her damp folds. “Cole—”

Her ability to speak disappeared as he swiped his tongue along her sex. Moaning, her head fell back as he began teasing her in earnest. He licked her outer lips and then worked his way inward, sliding his tongue up and down.

Everywhere except the tight bundle of nerves that needed his attention the most.

He lifted his head. “I love the way you taste, babe. Every time I bury myself in your body, I will need it on my tongue.”

Waving her hand, she murmured, “Mmmkay.” Falling back on her elbows, she knew she would agree to whatever he said as long as he put his mouth back where it was. “Please, Cole.”

“You need something?”

“You,” she whispered.

“Always.”

He slid a finger inside, found the spot she wasn't sure existed, and sucked on her clit. “Ooohhh!” Arching her back, she pushed against his lips, pleading for release. Thrusting his magical tongue deep inside, she felt him slide it in and out, making stars appear behind her eyes.

He moved faster, his tongue swirling harder and quicker as the world disappeared. Gasping for air, she shattered and

flew to the edge, falling over with white light clouding her vision.

Easing her down from her peak, he turned his hard licks into nibbles and softer strokes. Soothing her with gentle flicks, his grip tightened as she slumped back.

Ruined.

He'd done it with his mouth, and she wasn't sure she could take whatever else he had planned.

“One more, babe.”

He dove back in, and she came again within minutes. Raising her head a millimeter, she saw him grin.

“I love the taste of you...once a day isn't going to be nearly enough.”

Kelly let her head fall against the chair and let out a strangled laugh. “Miracles do exist.”

Having his woman fall apart against his mouth was maybe one of the ten best things he'd ever experienced, and they'd barely gotten started. Cole rubbed his mouth along her thigh and loved her dazed expression.

“That was two, plan on a couple more before we're done with round one.” Her eyes slowly opened, and the loopy smile she gave him had him almost stumbling. Before he could overthink what it meant, he turned the water on in the shower and thought about how much better this Saturday was than the last.

She was here of her own free will, wanting him and willing to see what the chemistry between them could become.

He lifted her from the chair and ensured she was steady once her feet hit the floor. “You okay, babe?”

“I’m delirious and more relaxed than I’ve ever been.” She lifted his hand to her mouth, pressing a kiss against his knuckles.

“I love making you happy.”

“Let me see if I can do the same for you.”

She gave him a saucy smile and walked past him, letting her soft curves brush against his skin. Biting his lip, he let out a chuckle and followed her in.

Seemed it was his turn to lose control.

Watching her sit on the bench and beckon him closer told him he’d be lucky if that’s all he lost. “Need something?”

“Come closer.”

Doing as she asked, he stood within an inch of her mouth. She looked up, gave him a wink, and then carefully moved his erection away from his stomach. Closing his eyes, he gritted his teeth so he wouldn’t come when her mouth touched him.

She licked the drop of pre-cum from his tip, and he let out a ragged breath. “Fuck, Kelly.” Her tongue slid down his cock in response. Fisting his length, she opened wide and took him to the back of her throat. “God damn!” He slid out, and she sucked the crown.

Her mouth was both heaven and hell, and he put his hand against the wall as she dictated the pace. Being under her control was devastating as she sucked him in and then out.

When he thought he couldn’t take more, she reached between his legs and palmed his balls. “Fuck, yes!” he shouted as she massaged them until they tightened, and his body shook.

She’d driven him to the edge.

“Jesus,” he ground out as she took him to the back of her throat and swallowed around him. “Your mouth is so greedy.” Drawing in quick, shallow breaths, he felt his shaft pulse as his hips jerked.

He climaxed with a raw shout. She took all of him and swallowed his seed while she hummed with satisfaction. Hanging his head, he tried to get air into his lungs while his body buzzed with pleasure. “Damn, babe.”

“Don’t move. I want to make sure you’re clean.”

Letting out a grunt, he watched as she licked up every last drop. Not only had she given him a fantastic blow job, but a part of her he never expected to have.

No doubt, she’d own him before the night was over. Collapsing next to her on the bench, he took her hand. “This beats the hell out of the shower we had last week.”

She dropped her head against his shoulder. “I’d have to agree.”

Sitting in the steamy box, holding hands, made him realize she already owned him. Twenty minutes of physical intimacy showed him what they could become to one another, and he didn’t know if one lifetime together would be enough.

Kelly let out a satisfied sigh as she collapsed on the bed, and her head hit the pillow. “Don’t even think about closing those eyes.” He crawled over her, letting their skin slide together before he sat back on his knees. “Because I’ve only gotten started.”

The low light from the bedside lamp illuminated her face enough so he could see a small smile. Sliding a condom on, he braced himself on his arms so she was caged in. He kissed her cheek, eyes, and nose. “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

“You say that because I just blew your...mind in the shower.”

“No, I’m just stating the obvious.” Her arms went to his shoulders, and she pulled him close. “You ready to get addicted to me?”

“Maybe I already am.”

“Then the next thirty minutes will just be an insurance policy.”

Kelly leaned up and kissed him, letting her hand slowly graze down his face. “You are one beautiful man, Cole McCallan. Inside and out.”

Choking on the emotion her words elicited, he slowly swallowed and slid into her. “So tight,” he murmured. He let her become accustomed to him. “Breathe.” When her hips tilted, he thrust inch by inch into her snug heat. “That’s it, babe, take all of me.”

She answered by wrapping her long legs around his waist and pulling him into her tight channel. Using his upper body as leverage, he took a long glide out before plunging back in, hard and fast. Her slick walls gripped him as her heels dug into his back. He felt her everywhere.

Sweat broke out on his forehead as the primal need to own her washed over him. He gave her a decisive thrust and felt her body move against his. “Kelly, fuck me back.”

Her nails dug into his shoulder as they climbed toward a climax together. It was fast and furious, and he felt more than mind-blowing pleasure race down his spine; he felt an emotional connection.

It was too soon and fast, but damn if he could shut it down.

Her climax hit, and his name fell from her lips as she shuddered, her body clasp him again and again in its warmth and heat. Allowing himself to join her, he came hard and emptied himself as his heart beat out of his chest.

Collapsing, he broke his landing with his arms and rolled over. He took her hand, glanced over, and let her happy smile fill his heart. “Next time, I’m coming inside you. No more condoms.”

Nothing. No words or rebuttal. “Did I take all your words?” She rolled over and closed her eyes. Pulling the covers over their sweat-soaked bodies, he hit the button for the light, plunging the room into darkness.

Hearing her breathing even out, he kissed her head and promised himself he would do everything in his power not to screw this up.

She was more than he deserved, and now that he had her in his bed and life, he didn't want to think about ever letting her go.

One way or another, he would succeed and go for the happy ever after he never thought he'd have.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Kelly enjoyed Cole's tub and let her sore muscles relax in the warm water. Feeling her face heat, she thought about the things they'd done with one another and how raw the experience had been.

Words she had never considered using had flown from her mouth, and feelings she never expected to experience occurred. The man wasn't a polite, paint-by-the-numbers lover, and there were moments when she thought they were one.

It had been brutal and achingly tender.

And she was a smitten kitten.

Hearing the door open, she saw the man of the hour enter with two cups of coffee, and her gym bag slung over his shoulder. "Good morning."

He dropped the bag on the floor and sat on the tub's edge. "Babe, we said that with our bodies when we woke up."

Sitting up, she twisted her wet hair into a knot. "I guess we did." She took the coffee and sipped it carefully. "As soon as I drink this, I'll get out of your hair, so you can enjoy your Sunday."

"No way, we're spending the day together on account of the fact we're in a relationship." He moved his hand through the bubbles that clung to her chest and slowly grazed his finger over her nipple.

Shuddering, she felt an immediate response between her legs. How that was possible after all that they'd done, she didn't know. "And what would you like to do?"

He licked his lips. "I'd like to take you back to bed and sixty-nine you again, but feeding you first might be necessary." He slid his fingers slowly over her breasts. "Or maybe you'd like to ride me reverse cowgirl so I can see your ass bounce as you cover my cock in your cream." He checked his watch. "Unfortunately, the cleaning service will be here soon, so it'll have to wait until this afternoon."

"That's a dirty mouth you have."

"You like it, so don't pretend otherwise."

"I'll act whatever way I want in the cold light of day."

"As long as it's just an act, then I guess it's fine."

She drank her coffee and let her mind blank out. "Are you serious about starting something together?"

Frowning, he leaned forward. "God damn right I am." He kissed her hard and then straightened. "We're going to grab brunch and then relax. Did you think I wanted to fuck and run?"

"Well, not exactly, but what you're suggesting is very coupley."

"No shit, Kelly, considering that's what we are." He set his empty coffee cup down and took her hand. "How the hell do you expect to get to the kids and minivan if we don't start figuring out how we will work together?"

She finished her coffee and handed him the cup. "You know I just said that so you'd run."

"Babe, I'm not a runner and know there's a whole lot of truth in what you said."

"I do not want a minivan!"

"Yeah, but you want the marriage, rugrats, and happy ever after."

Sinking into the water, she moved the bubbles around. Maybe she did, but it wasn't anything she was ready to talk about with Cole. The doorbell rang, and she silently thanked

whoever it was for interrupting the conversation. “You should get that.”

“It’s better if you just admit what you want; that way, we can see if it’s something we can have together.”

“You’re not the marrying kind, so why would I do that?”

“You don’t know what *kind* I am, so don’t assume.” He picked up the coffee cups and walked out of the bathroom.

Letting out a groan, she slid under the water and wondered how they got on the subject anyway. It wasn’t anything they needed to discuss, and she was smart enough to know their liaison wouldn’t last the month. No matter what Cole said.

The bedroom door opened, and she pulled on her leggings. “I’m almost ready.” When Cole didn’t respond, she turned and saw his frown. “What?”

“You can’t wear that to breakfast.”

“Why not? We’re not going someplace fancy.”

“Because Las Vegas does not need to see your perfect ass.” He grabbed a handful. “We don’t need our meal interrupted because I have to remind some poor bastard that it’s not polite to stare.”

“I wear this to the gym all the time.”

Holding up his hand, he closed his eyes. “I don’t need that picture in my head.”

“That’s a double standard.” Pulling out a loose sweatshirt, she slid it over her head. “Put a regular T-shirt on then because I don’t want women salivating over your muscles and tats.”

Grinning, he pulled her flush against his body. “You want to keep me all for yourself?”

“Yes, Cole. While we are sleeping together, we’re monogamous.”

“That goes without saying.”

She pushed at his chest, and he tightened it instead of releasing his hold. “This isn’t going to be easy, is it?”

Brushing her braids over her shoulder, he shrugged. “It might be.”

He ran his mouth over her shoulder and neck, causing a cascade of shivers to rack her body. “But we’re so different.”

He kissed the fluttering pulse in her neck and then nipped lightly. “Babe, that’s what is going to keep things interesting.”

Her body flooded with desire and a feeling she couldn’t name. Pressing her face into his neck, she inhaled his warm, woodsy scent and wondered if he could be the one she called home.

Cole slid into the booth beside Kelly and looked around the bright restaurant. He’d never been to Honey Salt and decided he’d been missing out. The place was filled with local families and smelled freaking fantastic.

He was starved, and not just for the stack of pancakes the guy at the next table was eating. Glancing over, he watched Kelly pull her glasses out of her purse and decided he liked his sexy girlfriend with her bare face and braids. He took her hand and laced their fingers together, noticing she smiled when he rested their joined hands on his leg. “What are you going to have?”

She studied the menu. “Everything.”

“Work up an appetite, did you?” Her eyes slid over, and she smirked.

“Seems so.” Turning, she let her eyes rake over his face slowly. “This dirty man kept me up all night and gave me more pleasure than I thought existed. I’m starved.”

Feeling happier than he could ever remember, he kissed her gently. “Just getting started, babe.” Her cheeks flushed pink, and he felt like he was seeing a part of Kelly she had never revealed.

She was a smart, fearless ball-buster in the office, and he loved that part of her, but the soft, blushing woman holding his hand was pretty damn spectacular too.

His favorite, though, was the one who’d been in his bed last night. That woman was open, giving, and a little clumsy. Everything he could’ve hoped for.

The night had been a little dirty, a whole lot real, and the mind-blowing connection they’d created was something he still couldn’t wrap his mind around. Seeing the waitress approach, he decided to look at the menu and leave his sappy thoughts for later.

After the waitress walked away, he heard Kelly’s phone ring. When she didn’t pull it out of her purse, he wondered why she didn’t take the call. “You can answer your phone.”

“I know. It would be rude, though, since we’re in a restaurant.”

“What if it’s an emergency?”

“I’ve programmed rings for my family, and it wasn’t them, so whoever it is can wait.” She folded her hands and gave him a prim smile. “I don’t like when people sit in a restaurant and gab; it’s rude and, unless it’s an emergency, completely unnecessary.”

Mimicking her, he looked over. “You want to give me your list of rules now or wait until after we eat?”

“Why would I bother since all you’d do is ignore them?”

“Babe, if you’ve got some important ones, I’d like to know about them. Just because I crossed most of the lines in our working relationship doesn’t mean I won’t behave in our personal one.”

“So, all that poking and joking you did at work was because you liked me and didn’t know what to do about it?”

“I knew what to do; I was just trying like hell not to. I don’t mess around with people I work with, and you made that damn near impossible with all your sass and fire.”

She played with the end of her braid. “I never thought you were attracted to me and just assumed I irritated the crap out of you.”

“Make no mistake, I was irritated as hell, but it was because I thought you’d never be interested in a guy like me.”

“Why wouldn’t I be interested in a war veteran who owns a successful business and loves his family?”

“Babe, I’m not a college graduate, avoided jail by joining the Marines, and grew up in a trailer park with a drunk, abusive father who could barely hold onto a job.”

“Those are circumstances; it’s not who you are. The man in front of me has put his life on the line in defense of this country and works hard every day, building something his family will be proud of for generations to come.”

Their juice was delivered, and he thought about her words and wondered how she came up with that version. “Kelly—”

“I’m right, and I think it’s about time you got rid of the outdated picture you have of yourself. Who you were at eighteen is not who you are now, and I bet if you looked in a mirror, you would see that.”

He pulled out his wallet and slid out an old crumpled picture. Placing it on the table, he frowned. “That’s me a month before I got popped for stealing a car. I was a senior in high school, doing hood-rat shit with my buddies, heading down a road leading to nowhere. I carry this picture around so I never forget where I came from and what I want to avoid.”

Kelly opened her purse and pulled out a leather planner. Flipping through it, she plucked a picture out and set it next to Cole’s. “That’s me, sophomore year in high school. The short hair, braces, and glasses made me about as popular with boys as you’d imagine. Thankfully, I went to an all-girls Catholic school, so my looks never mattered. I graduated high school without ever kissing a boy or having a date. I keep this picture

to remind myself that even though I grew into my face and body, I'm still that shy girl, and there's nothing wrong with that."

He pushed their pictures together and knew there had probably never been a more unlikely couple. And perhaps that's what would give them a chance at something pretty fucking great.

Taking out his phone, he lifted it and slung his arm around her shoulder. "Let's take a picture together and add it to these two." He tilted his head against hers and smiled as he took a few. Before he could look at them, she grabbed it from his hand and studied the screen.

"Babe, let me see."

"We should take another one when I've got makeup on, and my hair is done."

Snorting, he took it out of her hand and slid through the pictures. His woman was gorgeous, with a smile that lit up her face. He chose one and made it his screen saver. "This one is perfect." Setting the phone down next to their pictures, he nodded. "Now that tells the whole story."

Kelly picked up his picture and ran her thumb over his face. "I would've had a major crush on you." She kissed the image and set it down, closing her planner.

"Not so fast, lady." He grabbed the planner and started looking through it. "Let me see your senior picture."

"Uhh, I don't have one."

"Liar." He flipped through the planner and felt her hand cover his. "Show me."

"Fine." She pulled a picture out of a back pocket and slid it over. "Happy?"

He lifted it and whistled. "Damn, two years made a big difference. You were hot."

She tried to grab the picture back. "Don't make fun."

He kept it out of her reach. “Babe, if I had met you, I would’ve made it my mission to get into your pink panties and make you mine.”

“You would not have.”

He put the picture in his wallet along with the one of him and snapped it closed. “Now, we’re together forever.” He handed back the sophomore picture. “You can keep this one so you don’t forget what a swan you turned into.”

Their food was delivered, and he watched Kelly slip the picture into her planner and shove it into her purse. When the waitress left, he kissed her. “I think the rogue and the good girl have a lot of happiness ahead of them.”

“I hope so, Cole.”

He kissed her head and then sat back. “No hoping, babe, only knowing.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Cole sat at his desk, reviewed the applications they'd received, and hoped they'd have at least a dozen men who'd make it through the initial screening. He and his brothers had put the word out to their former brothers from the corps, and they were thankfully starting to get some interest.

"Hey, good looking, what are you doing?" Kelly called out as she entered his office.

He leaned back in his chair. "Waiting for you."

She swung a bag in her hand and closed the door behind her, hitting the lock. "Trust me; it was worth it."

Standing, he walked around his desk and saw her flushed cheeks. A locked door could mean a lot of things, and he prayed Kelly's ideas were similar to his. They'd been together a month, and he was ready for office sex. "Really?"

"My client appreciated all I've done this week to get her books in order and gave me a gift."

"Is it a gift I'm going to enjoy?" he asked as he leaned against the front of his desk.

"Possibly." She opened the pink bag and peered in, "There might be something," pulling out a scrap of lace, she held it up, "maybe this."

Licking his lips, he took the tiny peach silk thong and held it up. "I'd like the privilege of tearing it off your body with my teeth."

She took it out of his hands. "This stuff is too nice for that."

Taking her hips in his hands, he pulled her forward. “I like the cotton stuff you wear.”

“But silk is so much sexier.”

“Babe, the wrapping is never the best part of the present. What’s inside is all that matters, and I sure as hell like what’s inside those cotton panties you wear.”

The bag dropped from her hands, and she wrapped his arms around his neck. “Are you trying to make me fall for you?”

“Might be,” he responded as she moved her head until her lips touched his. Nothing more than a soft press of her mouth had him almost lost. Skimming his tongue back and forth over the seam of her lips, he coaxed her mouth open and slid inside. When she welcomed him eagerly, he responded by tangling their tongues together.

Her taste had become his addiction, and as much as his cock wanted to get in the game, he wasn’t ready to relinquish her mouth. Sliding his hands under her sweater, he skated his fingers up her sides and cupped her lace-covered breasts. “So soft,” he muttered.

She tilted her hips. “So hard.”

“All for you, babe.”

She wriggled closer, and he pulled her skirt up, setting her astride him with her knees on either side of his thighs. His cock jumped against his wool slacks, and her eyes flared with desire as she shifted her sex over his bulging erection. “That’s it, take what you need. He rocked her against his arousal and loved the low moan it produced.

Bracing his hands on her hips, he moved her back and forth. He could feel the heat and dampness from her panties and took her mouth. *So fucking hot*, he thought as he pushed her closer to her release.

“Feels so good, Cole.”

“Wait until I bury my big cock inside you and really rock your world.” His dirty words did the trick, and she tipped her

head back as she thrust her pelvis forward and let out a shuddering cry. Slamming their mouths together, he silenced the last of it and hoped most everyone had left for the day.

As she rode out her orgasm, the steady grind of their bodies had him almost coming in his pants, so he started counting backward in his head. Letting her mouth go, he watched her come apart in his arms and wanted to give her another one before he took his own.

He lifted her, carried her around his desk, and placed her ass on the wood. Collapsing into his chair, he couldn't help but smile as he slid her yellow panties down her legs. "Now, I'm going to lick up all that sweet honey I made drip out of your pussy."

Leaning up on her elbows, she opened her eyes. "Can't you just—"

"Be quiet, woman, and enjoy your second orgasm like the lady you are." He didn't wait for a response as he slid his chair closer and pushed her legs wide open. "Mine," he whispered.

Giving her pussy a soft, tender kiss, he used his fingers to spread her lips apart. "So pretty," he murmured as he dove in. Licking, sucking, and biting made her shudder. "That's it, babe. Let me hear how good I make you feel."

He sucked her pussy lips into his mouth and let them pop out. Pulling back, he saw her hands grip the edge of the desk. "I may not stop until you pass out."

"I'm about to, Cole."

"Lay back and get ready." He worked his tongue over her clit, and groaned as her sweet flavor rolled across his tongue.

He could eat her out all night; she was that incredibly addictive. Pushing a finger inside, he found her soft g-spot and applied pressure, keeping the rhythm with his tongue against her clit. Her body climbed toward its peak, and with one more flick, she came tumbling down with his name on her lips.

"Oh Cole, I think you might have ruined me."

“Fucking right, I did.” He stood and saw her head thrown to the side with a smile lighting up her face. “Are you still conscious?”

“Barely.”

“Get ready, babe, because the wild ride is about to begin.” He dropped his trousers and took himself in hand. “You might be sore, but it’ll be worth it.”

Looking up at his enormous cock, she swallowed and wondered if she would be able to walk out on her own steam.

The gleam in his eye told her it might not be possible, and when he pulled her body off the desk and turned her around so her tush was in the air, she knew for sure.

He gave her a soft slap, and she looked over her shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Enjoying the view,” he replied as he pinched her nipple.

He nudged his cock into her opening and slid in as her body opened eagerly. He was harder than a steel pipe, and she felt every thick pulsing inch of him as he rocked his hips back and forth.

Each thrust sheathed him deeper, and when she thought she couldn’t take more, he pulled her closer.

Surrounded, there wasn’t a part of her that he didn’t possess, so she closed her eyes and tried to fight the feelings attempting to claim her.

It’s just incredible sex, she told herself. His words don’t mean anything unless his actions follow. All the old lessons ran through her head as Cole played her body perfectly. He knew how to bring her to orgasm, but this felt different.

His cock glided in and out almost reverently, and she accepted that he was making his way into her heart. He increased his pace, and she fell headlong into a glorious

climax. His grip on her hips was merciless as he gave into his climax with a shout.

The cool wood felt perfect against her heated cheek. Sex had never been better, and she understood why people lost their minds trying to hold onto the person who made it possible.

“I like when you visit me at work,” Cole said as he stood.

She lifted herself slowly and took a minute to get her bearings. “Had no idea that showing you some pretty lingerie would result in triple orgasms.”

“Babe, you can pretty much count on it, and I don’t need to see any scraps of lace to make it possible.”

She pushed at his chest and smiled. “I’m going to put myself together.” Scooping up her panties on the floor, she walked to the private bathroom. When she entered, she saw her face in the mirror and laughed quietly. Who was that woman with bright eyes and flushed cheeks?

Peering closer, she let out a quiet giggle. “A woman who just had amazing sex with her—”

What was Cole? Boyfriend, lover, or a man she was seeing?

A month ago, he’d made a lot of noise about seeing what they could become but had been silent on the subject since. Not that it needed to be discussed daily.

But she’d be lying if she denied there was a part of her that craved a definition beyond the monogamy they agreed on.

Was her need to know born of fear or just her natural tendency to want to put things in boxes?

Running the water, she grabbed some paper towels and knew she wouldn’t ask for an answer about where they were headed. If a man wanted you, he came and got you, and the moment you felt the need to ask: ‘what are we’ is the moment you needed to get in your car and drive away.

She cleaned herself up, slipped on her panties, and decided to enjoy whatever they had until it was no longer fun.

The chances of Cole's relationship talk amounting to anything were too small to be calculated, and the best thing she could do was protect the soft, beating muscle in her chest.

All the feelings that were starting to percolate would do her no good. They had incredible sex together. Full stop. And to confuse it with anything else was not a mistake she'd make. Her heart had already been broken, and she was confident that if it happened again, there wasn't enough glue in the world to put it back together.

Twisting her hair into a knot, she practiced a breezy smile and returned to the office. Cole greeted her with a glass of bourbon. "Thank you."

"Where do you want to go to dinner? We could go to the Black Sheep or Andiron Steak and Sea."

Hearing the names of the restaurants, he frequented with the women he'd kept for a couple of weeks sent a warning chill through her body. She took a seat on the couch. "Let's enjoy our drink first, and then we can decide."

"Sounds good." He took a seat next to her. "Your phone rang a couple of times with the theme song from Rocky."

"My family." She stood and grabbed her purse, pulling her phone out. "We're trying to put plans together for my visit in July." She checked the messages and then slid the phone back in.

"You didn't say anything about a trip."

Retaking her seat, she took a sip of the bourbon. "A friend is getting married, and I'm returning for the wedding."

"Sounds like fun."

Studying his face, she couldn't decide if his expression meant he was hurt she didn't ask him to join her or relieved. "I didn't spend much time with them last time I was in LA, so they're excited to see me. There's a neighborhood barbeque on the weekend I'm home, so it will be fun. It's been happening for twenty-five years and is not to be missed."

"It's the full suburban dream."

Hearing the derision in his tone wasn't surprising, considering she'd heard it a hundred times over the months they had worked together. But she'd be lying if she didn't admit that it stung since it was directed at something she'd enjoyed for most of her childhood.

Perhaps it was time to see if all his relationship talk meant anything. If she invited him and he balked, she'd have her answer without asking the question.

Sort of brilliant if she did say so herself. "Would you like to join me? I can show you all the hot spots."

Letting out a harsh laugh, he shook his head. "Not my scene, babe."

Bingo! She set her glass down. "Exactly what part? The wedding, my family, or being stuck in Pasadena for a few days?"

Cole drained his drink. "Get real, Kelly. Are you ready to show me off to your family and friends? I bet your folks would have a heart attack the moment they saw me holding their little princess's hand. A guy with no college degree, a juvey record, and a lot of tattoos is not what they have in mind for you, so let's not shove it in their faces."

"You don't know anything about my parents or friends." Standing, she slid her hands on her hips. "Don't hide behind some bullshit and use my family as an excuse." Stomping over, she picked up her purse and bag. "At least be honest and admit you've scratched the itch, and now you're done."

She watched him stand. "I can handle the truth, Cole. Considering how little we have in common, I'm surprised we lasted the month."

"Kelly, don't be mad. We're having fun; let's not screw it up by—"

She put up her hand. "I get it and don't need to hear your excuses. I've heard just about every one there is, and yours would be one too many." She strode out of his office and told herself that knowing where they stood and what they were was good.

Taking several large gulps of air, she instructed herself that no crying could happen until she was home and had a glass of wine in her hand.

After that, all bets were off.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Kelly sat in her home office and appreciated the quiet as she finished the quarterly reports for the bakery she'd just taken on as a client. They were the go-to place for high-end wedding cakes, and she enjoyed the samples every time she stopped in.

Feeling better than she had in several days, she congratulated herself on avoiding the disaster she and Cole were headed for. As it was, she was barely bruised, and all the feelings she'd started to form had all but disappeared.

The iPad at her elbow dinged, and she saw her sister, Anne, was calling on Facetime. Accepting the call, she propped the tablet against her monitor. "Hello, sista."

"Why are you so freaking cheery? I thought you'd still be down in the dumps over what happened with Cole."

"Puleeze. A sexy, sweaty affair that lasted a month will not bring me down."

"How many times have you repeated that phrase to yourself?"

"At least a hundred, but that was just in the first two days." Anne's face filled the screen, and she let out a breath.

"Really?"

"I never thought the crazy chemistry would last as long as it did." Sitting back, she picked up a pencil and tapped it against her desk. "I knew his history and understood the risk. Thankfully, I didn't give pieces of myself away that I couldn't afford to lose."

"Sissy, that makes me so sad."

“Why?”

“Because your walls will become so damn thick, they’ll never crumble.”

“I think when the right one comes along, they won’t even exist.”

“Maybe Cole is the right one, and the nuclear option of ending things wasn’t necessary. *Maybe* this was just a regular argument, and it’s something you two can work out.”

“And perhaps I’m a Disney Princess, and my life just needs a little freaking fairy dust.” Covering her face, she sucked in a breath. “Sorry,” she mumbled through her fingers.

“This guy got to you in a way that no one ever has, and I’d hate to think that—”

“No.” She rubbed her face and then took in a deep breath. “I’m not going to ignore things this time. He made it clear that this trip wasn’t his scene and that we were just having fun. If I ignore that, then all the heartache down the road will be my fault. I didn’t pay attention to the signs with Sam, and I’m not making that mistake again.”

“You two have only been dating a month, and it might be a little soon for him to take on the family.”

“I completely agree, but he’s been a possessive alpha asshole, and, as far as I’m concerned, you don’t get to play both sides of the fence. He barked and brayed whenever another man looked my way, yet we’re just having fun?” She shook her head. “I call bullshit because you’re either in or you’re out. If he doesn’t want to escort me to a damn wedding where I have to face a man that broke me into a thousand pieces, then I have no use for him.”

Anne held up her hand. “Preach.”

She leaned her head in her hand and felt herself choke up. “It’s fine. I knew all his talk about making something was code for, let’s fuck until we get bored.”

“Does he know about Sam?”

“Of course not.”

“I bet he’d be happy to go if you told him.”

“Yeah, even I’m not that desperate for a pity date. I’m a strong woman and can handle seeing Sam; it won’t be a big deal if I don’t allow it to be.”

“But it would’ve been nice if the one interested in putting his face between your legs could also stand by your side when needed.”

She felt a tear slip down her face. “I can’t make another mistake, and Cole would be my next one if I kept seeing him. I’m being a hardass, but I won’t be shredded by another man.”

“I get it,” Anne replied. “I’m with you.” Sighing, she twirled a piece of hair. “So, what are we going to do about the wedding?”

“Nothing. It’s not like I can scare up a date in time.”

“You live in the land of gigolos. Why don’t you hire a gorgeous one and bring him with you so Sam has no questions about whether you’ve moved on and are happy?”

“Why can’t a single woman be as happy as one with a boyfriend?”

“A single woman is often happier once she gets over the fact that prince charming doesn’t exist.”

“But it would be nice to show up with a man, so Sam won’t give me that sad smile. I hate that smile and want to punch him in the face every time I see it.”

“What about that gorgeous mobster you work with?”

“Gio?”

“Yes.”

“He’s too busy with the new club. But maybe one of his henchmen would be willing to go.”

“Now you’re talking. Nothing says I’ve moved on and am blissfully happy like a mafia hitman.”

“I’ll bring it up at our next meeting.”

Laughing, Anne clapped. “I wish you were being serious.”

“Maybe I am.”

“Has Cole quit calling yet?”

“No, but I just let the calls go to voicemail.”

“Do you listen to the messages?”

“No.”

“Damn, that stubbornness is not to be underestimated.”

Snapping the pencil she had in her hand in half, she let out a bitter laugh. “He’s nothing more than a boy toy; the sooner I accept that, the better.”

“At least it was great sex.”

She dumped the pencil in the trash can. “It sure was, and soon that’s all I’ll remember about our time together.”

“The best thing you can do is get back on the horse and see who else is out there.”

“I know; I just can’t muster any enthusiasm.”

“It’ll happen soon enough. In the meantime, think about the gigolo/mafia hitman idea because it has some real merit.”

“Love you, Anne.” She blew a kiss to her sister and ended the call. Checking her tablet, she saw she had another couple of hours before she needed to be at the Red Door. Gio wanted to introduce her to his cousin, who was taking over the day-to-day of the second club, and she decided that she’d stay for a drink after she was done.

Maybe her sister was right, and she needed to go out and remember that there were lots of possibilities in the world.

Cole watched Terrence walk slowly into his office. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Making sure you’ve stopped throwing shit at people who dare to cross the threshold.”

“I only did that the first two days; now, I just curse people out.”

“Good to see you’re having healthy responses to your screw-up.”

Lifting a paperweight, he cradled it in his hand. “Not in the mood, brother.”

Terrence took a seat. “Any luck on getting through to her?”

“No, she won’t answer any of my calls.”

“Not surprising.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“She’s a grown-ass woman and doesn’t play.”

Groaning, Cole ran his hand over his face. “How can five minutes of conversation undo all that we had?”

“Sometimes it takes less and not to be an asshole...but how much did you two have?”

Cole flipped his friend off and stood. “We were making something.”

“Did that something include more than hot sex?”

“Just because I would put my life on the line for you doesn’t mean I won’t beat the shit out of you first.”

Terrence smirked. “You need to fight to make yourself feel better; come on, and let’s get to it.”

He inhaled a deep breath and then let it out. “Can’t mess up that pretty face of yours since it’s all you’ve got going for you.”

Zach walked in and looked between them. “Has anything been thrown yet?”

“No, but the night is young,” Terrence replied with a smile.

Zach walked over to the bar, poured three drinks, and handed them out. “To a week without having to bail Cole out of jail.”

“It’s not over yet,” Terrence replied before taking a slug.

Zach nodded. “Can I ask an obvious question?”

“You’re going to anyway,” Cole said as he leaned against his desk.

“What would’ve been so bad about meeting her family and friends?”

“Nothing.” He drained his drink. “Truth is, I panicked at the thought of all those people looking at me disapprovingly. When she suggested it, I flashed back to all the shit we went through as kids. Bottom line, I didn’t want Kelly to see me through their eyes.”

Zach leaned forward with his arms on his knees. “Brother, you took the brunt of the shit growing up, and all those peoples’ opinions about our family fell mostly on your shoulders. I get it. But that was over twenty years ago, and it’s time to let it go because it just cost you a hell of a woman.”

“I look in the mirror every day, and I see the Marine I was and the businessman I am now. But lurking in the background is that kid from crappy circumstances.”

“Sounds like a damn good man; introduce me to him the next time he’s around,” Terrence said as he finished his drink. “You need to tell her what’s going on because I bet if she knew, she’d get over her mad and work things out.”

“I’ve been trying, but she won’t see or talk to me. The way her face fell when I told her it wasn’t my scene tells me this meant a lot more to her than just having a date to a wedding.”

“Of course it does, asshole,” Terrence barked. “It’s damn obvious she was inviting you into her life and giving you a chance to be more than just a fuck boy.”

He leaned forward. “You’re skating a damn thin line.”

Terrence stood and mirrored his posture. “It’s time you got out of your own damn way.” Pounding his fist on the desk, he looked Cole in the eye. “I thought this thing with Kelly meant you were ready to welcome the blessing the good Lord has in store for you.”

“Don’t know that I’m deserving, but whatever.” Cole walked around the desk and sat. “All I could think of was when I went to pick up a girl for a dance in high school, and her father wouldn’t let her go. What happens if I show up in Pasadena and her parents react similarly?”

“Not possible,” Zach said firmly. “Kelly is not judgmental, and that has to do with the people who raised her. And if, by some miracle, her parents were uptight, she never would’ve asked you to join her in the first place,”

Cole folded his hands. “Guess it’s possible.”

Terrence rolled his glass in his hand. “It’s Friday, so I bet she’s having dinner at the Red Door. Let’s head over and see if a face-to-face is possible.”

“It might not be a bad idea. She won’t make a scene in public, so I might have a decent chance of getting her to talk to me.”

Zach stood and collected the glasses. “Let’s go, Romeo, and see if we can get a course correction, so no one will have to put up with your mood anymore.”

Cole stood and felt better than he had since Kelly left his office. Facing his demons was never easy, and he hated that he still carried around crap from his youth. Looking at his wallet on the corner of his desk made him think about the pictures he had of the two of them.

He’d never gone down without a fight before and sure as hell wouldn’t let Kelly go without a damn good one. She’d fascinated, captivated, and irritated the hell out of him, and he wouldn’t let the smart, funny woman go until they had a decent conversation.

It would take more than one fight to end them, and she would soon understand that.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Cole stood with Terrence and Zach in the lobby of the Red Door and didn't know why they were not being let in. Studying the concierge who was on the phone made him wonder if Gio had taken sides with Kelly. Considering how important she was to his business, he had no doubt he'd be on the losing end.

"Mr. Zanetti will be with you momentarily," the woman announced once she ended the call.

Zach crossed his arms. "Gio's pissed."

"The mobster loves Kelly, so it ain't no surprise," Terrence responded.

Before more could be said, the door swooshed open, and Gio walked out. "Gentlemen."

Zach clapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, man."

"You and Terrence can go in; I just need a moment with Cole."

Crossing his arms, Cole let out a long breath, knowing that losing his shit wouldn't get him closer to his goal. "You guys grab a table, and I'll be there in a bit." Terrence lifted an eyebrow, and he waved him off. "It's all good."

Once the men had gone in, Cole shoved his hands in his pockets. "Guessing this is about Kelly."

"You would be correct. I'm not one to get involved in other people's affairs, but I make an exception when my sweet *Cara* looks like she's had her heart broken."

"We had a fight, and I'd like to work it out, but the stubborn woman has avoided me like a rash."

“She’s talking to my cousin, and I do not want you to upset her in any way. No possessive bullshit and chest beating will occur. Do you understand me?”

“Why the hell is she talking to your cousin?”

Gio looked at the ceiling. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about.”

Cole held up his hands. “I will behave and promise not to make a scene.”

“You respect her wishes, no matter what they are.”

“Fuck you; I’ve always done that.”

“If that were the case, she wouldn’t be talking about taking Luca to a wedding next month.”

Feeling frustration fill his chest, he looked down at the ground and counted to ten. He could handle this. Slowly raising his head, he nodded. “I’ll be going with her, and she’ll understand that fact before the evening ends.”

Gio pointed to the door that led to the street. “Go home, Cole.”

He stood his ground. “No! My woman is in there, and we will work this out. I won’t be an asshole, and if I need to get on my knees so she knows how serious I am, then that’s what I’ll do.”

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Gio shook his head. “One chance is all you get. If I see something I don’t like, I’m kicking your ass out of the club.”

Cole put out his hand and shook Gio’s. “Thanks, man.”

Gio nodded to the hostess and then escorted Cole into the club. “Behave.”

“Absolutely, not a question.”

“If only that were true,” Gio responded as he nodded to Sal. “I’d offer you good luck, but I doubt it’ll help.”

Cole let out a grim laugh and made his way to the table that Terrence and Zach were occupying. He slid into a seat and

picked up the drink they'd ordered for him. Draining it, he studied Kelly and felt the knife in his heart slide in a little deeper.

How was she more beautiful?

Cole set his glass down. "It's not going to be easy."

"The good stuff never is," Zach replied.

"I'm going to go over and say hello, so she has a moment to get herself together before you approach," Terrence said as he stood.

"Thanks, man." Watching Kelly closely as she chatted with the big as fuck GQ mobster made him wonder if the thing between them meant as much to her as it did to him. He'd never been as deep with a woman and realized he'd probably never get over her if they couldn't work things out.

Which made his response to her invitation all the more horrifying. If he'd just let the ghosts from his past stay buried, he never would've reacted like such an asshole, and they'd not be in the position they were. Which told him he had some things to handle if he wanted a relationship with Kelly.

"What's your first move going to be?" Zach asked.

"Say I'm sorry as often as needed until she gives us a chance."

"Can't go wrong with that."

"Hope so." He watched Terrence talk to Kelly and held his breath when she turned. Locking their eyes, he saw her smile slip. Standing, he walked slowly in her direction, knowing it would always be her. No one would ever make as much sense, and he would make sure she understood that.

She'd breached his cold heart and burrowed in, making a place for herself that no one ever had. And the only thing he could do was find a way to do the same with hers.

Kelly felt her hands shake as she stared at Cole and set her glass on the bar. With a slow breath, she turned away and felt Terrence's arm on her back. "It's fine, T."

"Anything I can do?" Luca asked with a gentle smile.

"No." She tried to form a smile and decided it was probably more of a grimace, so she let her face fall.

"Luca, come meet Zach; he's the one who trained all the security at the new club, and since you're running it now, you two should get acquainted."

Standing, he nodded. "Only if Kelly doesn't need me."

"I'm fine; I'll see you on Monday."

"All right." Luca gave Cole a once-over when he approached. "Just call if you need me."

Terrence led Luca away before Cole could respond, and she turned her chair toward the bar. "What brings you here?"

"Had to run you down since you won't answer my calls."

"There is nothing to talk about, Cole." Turning her head, she was immediately hit by his beautiful eyes. "We had a good time, and it's over. No need to do a post-mortem."

"Considering we're not dead, I'd have to agree." He took her hand and watched her eyes close. "We fought, and now I'd like to fix it."

"There's nothing to fix. We want different things, and there's no need to keep going if we can't make each other happy."

"I'm very happy with you."

She studied his face and couldn't miss the sincerity in his words. "I don't want to invest in something that isn't going anywhere."

"I'm sorry about how I responded to your invitation. I was an asshole and completely wrong." Leaning closer, he dipped his head. "I flashed back to some old stuff that I thought was handled and reacted poorly."

“It was too soon to invite you to a wedding, but knowing how you feel probably saved us grief.”

“You’re not listening, babe. I screwed up, and the crap I said had nothing to do with me meeting your family or going to a wedding together. If you want me to come, I’d be honored to meet anyone you think is important.”

The stress of the week crashed over her shoulders. “I hate you.”

Running his finger over her hand, he swallowed. “Yeah, why’s that?”

“Because you make me a fool. I made all these grand pronouncements, and then I see you in person, and they crumble. I told myself I’d need a lobotomy and good drugs to get involved with you and ended up having sex with you ten hours later.”

“Changing your mind is not a big deal, babe.”

Untangling their hands, she picked up her drink and took a sip. “It is for me.” Uncrossing her legs, she sat back. “I’ve repeatedly told myself how glad I was that I avoided getting further involved. And now your stupid face is making my heart ache.”

“My heart cracked in half when you left my office. I didn’t know how to fix it right away, and by the time I figured out how, you wouldn’t take my calls.”

“I shouldn’t have invited you.”

“I disagree.”

She ran her hand over her neck and let out a sigh. “Perhaps I did it as a test. The sex we had in your office sparked a ton of feelings that made me uncomfortable, and somewhere deep inside, I knew you’d likely balk at the invitation.”

“Is this like the minivan, marriage thing?”

“Probably. I didn’t understand my motivation until I got home and drank a half-bottle of wine.”

“So, we both spooked.”

“Seems so,” Kelly replied.

Cole linked their fingers. “Your invitation triggered my self-doubt, and I hate the idea of your family not thinking I’m good enough.”

“The high-school punk thought he wasn’t good enough for the girl who grew up in the big house?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, the geeky girl who didn’t date until she was twenty thought the good-looking, cool guy wasn’t interested in anything more than sex.”

Cole pulled her close and buried his face in her hair. “Babe, we gotta work on our communication skills.”

“The man who broke my heart is going to be there, and I wanted to have you at my side so I could show him that I’ve moved on.” Raising her eyes, she grimaced. “I should’ve told you.”

“Not necessarily. If we’re working right, all you need to do is tell me you need me, and I’ll be there.”

“Doubt we’ll ever get there.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“No, it’s reality.”

“Can we go somewhere else and have this conversation?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” His hand went to her cheek, and she looked up. “What?”

“Babe, one fight is not the end.”

“But—”

“You are not a quitter, so get your ass up, and let’s go hash it out.” He took her hands and held them tightly. “Please.”

Closing her eyes, she shook her head. “I can’t let you break me.”

Moving closer, he kissed her head. “I will never do that.” He tightened his hold. “Please...let’s just talk.”

Letting her shoulders fall, she nodded. “I guess one more conversation won’t kill me.”

“Thank God,” he murmured.

“You can come to my house because I need to get out of my work clothes.”

“I like the sound of that.”

She pushed his chest. “I’m going to wear my ugliest sweats and wash my face.”

“Still like the sound of it.”

“Why are you being so—”

“Irresistible?”

“Not the word that came to mind.” Lifting her drink, she took a sip. “You behave, Cole McCallan.”

“Of course, whatever you want.” He stood. “You’re not taking Luca to the wedding.”

Standing, she straightened her skirt. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

He let out a groan and ran his hand over his face. “After we fix our disagreement and have amazing make-up sex, will you invite me again to meet your family?”

“How amazing?”

“Is that even a real question?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I will give you a strong maybe.”

“I can live with that.”

“Good because it’s not like you have a choice.”

“How long do you plan on busting my balls over this?”

“Not sure.” She picked up her purse and felt his hand go to her back. “We may decide to go our separate ways.”

“Not possible, Kelly. There is no way I’m not walking away from the best thing to come along because we hit a rough patch.” Taking her arm, he stopped her. “I don’t want us to quit.”

“But what if it’s the sanest option?”

“Babe, I’ve got no use for sanity.”

“Well, I do! I’ve already tangled with heartbreak and have no appetite for more pain.”

“Guess there’s a story that I need to hear.”

“Yeah, and it’s not a pretty one.”

“Don’t need pretty; just need real.” He cupped her cheek and rested his head against hers. “Whatever happened to make you as incredible as you are, is a good thing. I want to know you, Kelly, and I hope you still have a little interest in getting to know me.”

“God help me, but I’m still interested.” She let out a breath. “I guess it’s time to let some fences down.”

“If we’re gonna do a show and tell, can we do it naked?”

Laughing, she stepped away. “Dirty boy.”

“That’s true.” He wrapped his arms around her waist. “But you love it, and since you’re not happy, I need to play to my strength.”

“There is plenty I like about you that doesn’t involve your body.”

“Can you think of one right now?”

“No, but in five minutes, I bet I can.”

He let out a low laugh. “That’s what I thought.”

She ran her tongue over her lips and noticed his eyes tracking the movement. Before she could move away, he kissed her fiercely. Swiping his tongue over her lips, he demanded entry, and she mindlessly gave in. “Cole,” she muttered as she pulled away. “We’re in public.”

“Considering what goes on behind those red doors, we’re fine.”

“Be that as it may, I will not be part of the entertainment.” Smoothing out her hair, she squared her shoulders. “And we have a lot to talk about.”

“Absolutely.” He took her hand and led her toward the door. “And, after we’re done with that, we’ll let our bodies communicate.”

Trying to keep a straight face, she followed him out and promised herself she wouldn’t take the easy road and fix their relationship with sex.

No matter how tempting it was.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Cole watched Kelly walk in and loved the T-shirt and shorts she wore. When she sat in the chair, he decided not to be disappointed.

“I missed you like crazy, babe.”

“Unfortunately, I missed you too.”

Leaning forward, he waited. When she played with her hair, he knew what she had to share wasn't easy.

“Cole, I need to be honest with you.”

“Always a good idea.”

“I hate to admit this because it suggests I've taken our liaison for more than it is.”

His stomach turned. “We have a lot more than a liaison, babe.”

“Not really, but that's not the point.” She looked down at her hands. “When you told me that escorting me home wasn't your scene and used that derisive tone, I got triggered. It spun me back to the dark days of the end of my last relationship. My ex-fiancé spoke with an utter lack of respect right before he ended our engagement via text.”

“The asshole ended a freaking engagement without having the balls to meet face to face? That's some kind of messed up.”

She looked out the window. “Sam and I were together for two years and engaged for eight months. His behavior changed dramatically after he proposed. After he left me, he married another woman a month later.”

“Fuck.” He rubbed his head. “The story just keeps getting worse.”

“Needless to say, it took me more than a minute to process the experience, and I might have one or two residual trust issues.”

“Jeeze, Kelly. I’m so freaking sorry that happened.”

“It’s been three years since I had my world turned upside down, and while I didn’t enjoy the experience, I am grateful for it.”

“I can’t imagine how having your hopes and dreams crushed produces that kind of attitude, but good for you.”

“I have a stubborn heart, Cole. For good or bad, once it sets its hooks into something, it doesn’t let go. That doesn’t work out well when it’s got the wrong target.”

“Respect, Kelly.” He dropped his head. “It takes a brave warrior to hand over their most precious gift to another, not knowing if they’ll value it or not.” He raised his eyes. “I’ve never managed it.”

“I don’t know that I was all that brave. I saw what I wanted and ignored every red flag that was waved in my face. I had an idea of how things were supposed to go and wouldn’t let reality get in the way of my vision.”

Fisting his hands, he was surprised at how much anger he was still capable of. “But the asshole asked you to marry him!” He couldn’t conceive how anyone could willingly put another human through that kind of pain.

“So?” She let out a huff. “People ask for things all the time. It doesn’t mean you have to agree or accept.”

“But breaking it off with a text is bullshit.”

“No arguments. But I’m responsible for my part in the debacle and don’t want to make the same mistakes by ignoring the signs.”

“And I’m guessing I’ve given you quite a few.”

“I’m trying to learn the lessons on the first go around.” She twisted her mouth together. “I don’t know that—”

“We had a bump in the road, and I think it’s something we can work out.”

“I don’t know if that’s possible.”

Not ready to give in or give up, he changed tactics. “So this asshole is going to be at the wedding?”

“Yes. His brother is marrying one of my good college friends.” She pushed herself to her feet. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Yeah, that would be great.” He watched her hands twist together. “For the record, you’re damn lucky you got out in time.”

“I suppose so.”

Cold fury rolled over his body. “You still have feelings for the guy?”

“No! I just would’ve preferred to learn the lesson another way.”

“If only something like that was possible.” Taking a step closer, he grabbed her hands. “I have at least a dozen lessons that I would’ve orchestrated differently.”

“I should’ve told you why I wanted you to attend the wedding.” She gave him a small smile. “Made it clear that I didn’t see it as some weird next step in dating.” She bit her bottom lip. “We were just hanging out and nothing more.”

“Babe, we’re doing a hell of a lot more than that. And I should’ve said yes before you finished your sentence. If you want me to be somewhere, I need to be at your side.” He ran his finger over her soft skin. “As I said earlier, I let old crap get in the way, which is inexcusable.”

“I never expected you to meet my family. It’s not like we were on the road to a serious relationship, and it was a big ask.”

“No, it wasn’t!”

Sliding her hands away, she entered the kitchen and opened the fridge. “Do you want a beer?”

“Yeah, that’d be great.” He slid onto a stool, watched her open one, and push it over. “I’m so fucking sorry for how I reacted to your invitation.”

She filled a glass with wine and took a seat across from him. “As much as we’ve bickered, you never used that dismissive, condescending tone. And for the record, it’s not one I ever want to hear again.”

“Understood.”

“Right after Sam proposed, he put me down and pretended he hadn’t. It made me feel crazy because I knew he was gaslighting me. If you don’t like me, fine, I can handle it. Say it to my face, own it, and then move on. But taking shots is not acceptable.”

“I’m on board with everything you just said, so how do we move forward?”

“I’m not sure if moving anywhere makes sense.” Running her finger over her glass, she let out a sigh. “I don’t know that we can make each other happy.”

Cole rested his hand on her leg. “That’s bullshit.”

“No, it’s not.”

“I think it’s time we went all in.” The shocked expression on her face wasn’t encouraging but screw it. It was now or never. It was up to him to show her he was the real deal. “We’ve spent a month together, and it’s been amazing, but most of it has been spent in bed.” Her mouth going upside down spelled trouble, so he tipped her chin up. “Make no mistake, I freaking loved it. But, know it’s not the best way to build a relationship. Since I have almost no experience making that happen, I’m open to suggestions.”

“What exactly are you saying, Cole?”

“You are my woman, girlfriend, boo, bae, or whatever label makes you feel comfortable. I’ve got your back and vice versa. You need something; call me, lean on me, and know I’m

your man. Everything we do from now on will be meant to build a solid foundation for our marriage, family, and dynasty. You are my queen, and no one comes before you, and I'm your king and ask the same of you. This is the real fucking deal, and I'm ready to go all in."

"Are we talking minivans?" she asked with a laugh.

"Babe, I'll get you a real nice SUV 'cause your ass is too fine to be sittin' in anything else." Watching her face, he waited. When she gave him his favorite smile, he took the first full breath in a week.

"I've given pieces of myself away to men who didn't deserve it, and I'm tired of selling myself short. If you're being real, I'll leap into the void and invest."

"I'm done flinching, Kelly. I know this is just a lot of words, so all I can say is watch my actions, and then you'll know for sure. Each day, we'll put another brick on our castle, and before too long, you won't have any questions."

"I never would've guessed you'd be interested in a relationship."

"I am with you. I was playing the odds, hoping you'd profess your undying love and devotion, so I knew it was safe to do the same. But that's chickenshit, and I'm not a man who's ever stooped to that level. You scare the hell out of me, and I'm not sure a punk like me deserves a woman like you, but I'm not letting it stand in my way anymore."

"You're no punk, and I'd ask that you look in the mirror and realize that the man you see deserves every good thing in the world."

He stood and took her hands. "Which is why you're my queen."

"Do I get a crown to go with my new title?"

"If that's what you want." Running his fingers over her face, he felt the knife lodged in his chest disappear. "Are you really in?"

"Yes. I am."

“I’m sorry I let old shit trip me up.”

“All we can do is communicate what’s happening and be real. I promise not to waver and ask that you do the same.”

“I’m a damn Marine; ain’t nothing you got that will spook me.”

“If you’re serious about attending the wedding, we’ll stay with my family.”

He swallowed. “No problem.”

She let out a laugh and rested her head against his chest. “Don’t you want to know what you’re in for?”

“Sure.”

“My father is a general surgeon who is brilliant in the operating room. In life, he’s a lot like the absent-minded professor. My mom is a psychiatrist and likes to know about every single one of your feelings. She won’t rest until she knows you’ve had the chance to express yourself fully. It’s exhausting and wonderful and will make you want to consume an unreasonable amount of alcohol or donuts. My twin brothers are attorneys and work for the ACLU. My sister is a teacher and is one of my favorite people in the world. I grew up in a big, loud, chaotic house, and the only sin you can commit is being narrow-minded or judgmental.

“If you dare to join me, expect an excruciatingly long conversation with my Mom and drinks with my father where the Dodgers will be discussed ad nauseam. My sister is going to put you through your paces. My brothers will not be around because they’re usually out of town trying cases.”

“Not what I expected to hear.”

“Did you think I came from some uptight family?”

“Well—”

“Never mind, don’t answer that.”

“You like your rules and can be a little intense, so I assumed that was a result of the environment you grew up in.”

“I’ve needed a lot more structure in my life over the last couple of years, but it had to do with the horrendous mistake I made in getting involved with Sam. I haven’t trusted myself much, and the control made me feel better.”

“Is that why you were hanging out at the Red Door?”

“What do you mean?”

“You told me you had a merry widow and a crop, which certainly goes with the whole control thing.”

“Cole, you know I like to take my bra off the minute I get home, and the idea of trussing myself up in a getup to turn a man on is way more than I’m willing to do. So being a dominatrix is not on my list.”

“Good, because being a sub is not on mine either.”

She wiggled her hips and raised an eyebrow. “Are you lying?”

“Babe, it wasn’t the whip that made me hard. You look in my direction, and I’m ready to go.”

“Have we gotten to the makeup sex part of the evening?”

“I’m hoping so, but it’s your call. As much as I want you, I won’t jeopardize our reconciliation. If we need to spend more time talking, then let’s do it.”

“I’m talked out for now.”

He stepped back and took her hand. “Then take me to bed, and let me show you how much I missed you.”

“Come on, king, let’s go consummate this reconciliation.”

“Feel free to use my title as often as you want.”

“As long as I get a crown, it won’t be a problem.”

“Done.” He trailed behind her and felt like his heart was going to explode. Everything he never knew he wanted was within reach, and all he had to do was make sure not to screw it up.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Kelly sat in her old office at McCallan Security and revised the software she had installed to include some updates the IRS had requested. The audit was over, and the brothers did not have to write a check. It went as she predicted, and both sides decided to call it a wash, and she wouldn't need to refile for the year in question.

Smelling popcorn, she looked up and saw Terrence standing in the doorway. "Are you tempting me again?"

"Don't let Cole hear you talk that way; otherwise, he'll give me the stink-eye for a week."

She let out a laugh and put out her hand. "You know I have no willpower."

Glancing down at the bag, he grinned. "Oh, you mean my snack and not my very fine body."

"Ms. Jazzy would never allow it."

Taking a chair, he pushed the bag of popcorn across the desk. "So true, my woman likes to keep me all to herself."

Taking a handful of popcorn, she popped it into her mouth. "We had fun at dinner the other night; I hope we can make it a regular thing."

Terrence took the bag back and shook some into his hand. "Me too. Jazzy thinks having couple friends is important and likes you and Cole, so whenever you two want to hang, let us know."

"We're going to LA next week, maybe the week after that. We could go to a show or something."

“Sounds good to me; she loves Cher for some reason, and I know she’d like to see her perform.”

“Me too!”

Terrence shuddered. “How Cole and I got ourselves involved with women with such bad taste in music is hard to understand.”

“Cher is a rock legend, and it’s too bad you boys don’t understand that.”

Cole stuck his head in the office. “What don’t we understand?”

“Cher.”

Cole glanced at Terrence and grimaced. “Are we going to a show?”

“Eventually.”

“May need a couple of drinks before I’m ready for that one.”

“No shit,” Terrence replied with a laugh.

“Are you coming over for dinner tonight?” Kelly asked.

“Of course, it’s Blue Apron night.”

“We’re making chicken and poblano tostadas.”

“I’m going to meet with Zach and Seth, and then I’ll be ready to go.”

“All right.” She watched him walk out.

“He’s a hell of a lot easier to work with now that you two have worked things out.”

“Hope he survives the trip next week, and nothing makes him want to run for the hills.”

Crossing his leg over his knee, Terrence lifted an eyebrow. “Are you sending our boy into a skirmish he can’t survive?”

“No, my parents are going to welcome him with open arms. I’m just afraid he’ll freak and think they want him to join the family before he’s ready.”

“They want to marry your old ass off or what?”

“Ha, ha.” Picking up a pencil, she tapped it against the desk. “I know he didn’t grow up with the greatest family situation, and my family is a little overwhelming, so I don’t want it to be too much.”

“If your parents are as cool as you say, he’ll be fine. The only monkey crawling on his back is his fear of them not accepting him.”

“He’s an incredible man with many accomplishments; how could they not love him?”

Terrence leaned forward and knocked his knuckles on the desk. “You two are going to be fine.”

“I hope so because if this doesn’t work out, I may have to swear off men completely.”

Standing, Terrance grabbed his bag of popcorn. “As long as you stay out of your own way, it’ll work out.”

“Thanks, T.”

He stopped at the door. “For what?”

“Sharing your snack.” She blew him a kiss and then laughed when he looked side to side. “Don’t worry; he knows I only have eyes for him.”

“He’s not reasonable when it comes to you, so let’s not test him.”

“Fine.”

“Behave, woman, because I can’t take another week of Cole throwing shit.”

“All right, if you insist.” She watched him walk down the hall and wondered if Cole had been out of sorts. Shrugging, she went back to work and decided to ask him later.

Cole walked into Seth's office and grabbed a seat. "Hey, little brother."

"Hey." Closing his laptop, he pushed his chair back. "Damn, glad to be on the other side of the audit."

"Me too."

"Kelly's recommendation for the lawyer was right on. The woman pushed back at just the right moment."

"Agreed. It also helped to have Kelly on-call, so she could answer any questions about the amendments we filed."

"Hope we don't have to go through that again."

Zach strolled in and grabbed a chair. "What are we talking about?"

"Audit."

"Damn, I hated that shit."

"God willing, it won't be something we ever have to go through again," Cole commented.

"You ready for next week?" Seth asked.

"Yeah, we're heading out on Thursday and will return on Monday. Kelly has a bunch of things planned."

Zach let out a whistle. "This is the first time you've met a girlfriend's parents, right?"

"Yes, and from everything Kelly has said, they're very friendly and easygoing."

"You nervous?" Seth asked.

"Yeah, but not as much as I was a month ago. We're solid and only getting better with each passing day." He rubbed the back of his neck and then looked between his brothers. "She's probably the one for me."

Zach leaned forward. "Are we talking about a ring and everything?"

"Yeah, the American dream with kids, dogs, and soccer games."

Seth snorted. “Who the hell are you?”

Cole put up his hands. “Never guessed it would happen to me, but we’re headed in that direction.”

“Shit,” Seth said quietly.

“What are you worried about?” Cole asked.

Seth ran his hand over his desk. “Nothing. It’s just a huge shift.”

Zach punched Cole in the arm. “If you can find someone to love, then maybe it’s possible for us.” He linked his hands and rested them behind his head. “Maybe the shit we grew up with doesn’t dictate our future.”

“I’m trying like hell to see if it’s possible,” Cole responded. “We’ve built an incredible business together, and I’d like to see us have a chance to build the families we always wanted to. Meeting Kelly has made me believe it’s possible and something we all should have a shot at.”

Seth stood. “The McCallan brothers might be ready for some happy shit.”

“Damn straight,” Cole responded.

“Why the hell not?” Zach added.

Looking at two of the three most important people in his life, he hoped like hell it was possible. They’d been to hell and back, and it would be great if they could leave it in the past and walk toward something that would make the trip seem worthwhile.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Kelly looked up at her high school and felt a flood of emotions as she stared at the familiar brick building. “Westridge, oh, how I love you.”

“Can’t believe my girlfriend was an all-girl school.”

Turning, she gave Cole a wink as he took her hand. “If you want me to take home one of my plaid skirts so we can role-play, just let me know.”

Leaning back, he gave her a slow once-over. “Every time I think I have you figured out, you throw me a curveball.”

“Get used to it because I plan on doing it for a long time.”

“We’ve been together almost three months, and not a day goes by that you don’t shock the shit out of me in one way or another.”

“I haven’t done anything today, so let’s find a place to fool around.” Tugging him, she walked toward the campus that gave her four incredible years.

As they entered the quad, Kelly thought of all the fun she’d had with her friends and the incredible foundation she’d built for college.

Attending an all-girls school wasn’t for everyone, but it had been the perfect place for her. By the time she’d graduated, she not only was more than ready for college but had a solid sense of self. Something she’d found invaluable when she landed at ASU and could speak her mind with ease.

“This place looks like a mini-college campus and couldn’t be more different from the high school I attended.”

“Other than the all-girl thing, what’s the biggest difference?”

“How familiar are you with Bakersfield?”

“I’ve just driven past it on the way to someplace else.” She took his hand. “When was the last time you were back?”

“Probably fifteen years ago.”

“Do you have any family still living there?”

“My dad, along with his brother and family.”

“What about your mom?”

“She took off when I was ten, and we never heard from her again.”

“I’m sorry, Cole. That had to be awful.”

“It sure wasn’t a lot of fun. Dad fell apart after mom left and became a functioning alcoholic.” He stopped walking and brought their hands to his chest. “It was a shit childhood, and my brothers and I were lucky to get out. The Marines gave us all a chance to change the trajectory of our lives, and we wouldn’t have the company if it wasn’t for what we learned during our time in the corps.”

“Considering the amount of combat you three saw, it’s a miracle you all came home in one piece.”

“No doubt about it. We have over a dozen deployments between the three of us, with most of them in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Looking around the leafy campus, she was struck again by how different their paths had been. “You have so much to be proud of. I hope you take a moment now and again and remember that.”

“Not my style, babe.”

“Then I guess it will be my job to remind you.” She kissed him quickly and then started walking. “This is a full-circle moment for me since I’m holding hands with a hot guy who never would’ve looked my way when I was a student.”

“Back at you because a sexy little thing like you never would’ve given my hoodlum ass a second look.”

“Oh, that is such a lie. You probably had swagga at twelve.”

“Are you saying that because I’ve got muscles and tats?”

“No!” She unlinked their hands and slowly walked around him. “It’s the way you walk and hold yourself. It’s all loose and cool, like you don’t give a shit what anyone thinks. Add your light blue eyes and smile that promises all kinds of dirty things, and you have swagger to spare.”

He pulled her against his chest and ran his nose along her cheek. “Ain’t nothing compared to you, princess.” Sliding his hand down her fitted summer dress, he grinned. “You look like a good girl with your perfect clothes and hair, but I know you’ve got a ton of moves that make you my perfect dirty girl.”

“That’s only with you.”

“Which is how it will stay because no other man will ever taste your delicious mouth or touch your soft skin as long as I’m alive.” Sliding his mouth along her neck, he left a trail of kisses. “Now that I’ve got you, I’m not letting go.”

“Back at you, Cole.” She pushed her hand under his T-shirt and felt his muscles move along his back as she raked her nails over his warm skin. “Give me a kiss, and then we can walk over to the field and find a place to make out.”

“You gonna let me get to second base?”

“Maybe.” He slammed his mouth against hers and left no doubt he could get to any base he wanted with little effort.

Cole lay on Kelly’s bed in her childhood bedroom and looked at the yearbook from her senior year. Not only had she been on the cross-country team, but she also had participated

in student government and a ton of clubs. Pictures of her and her friends littered the pages, and he thought her blue and red plaid skirt was sexy as hell. Add to that her carefree smile, and he was glad they hadn't met until he had a chance.

The door to the bathroom opened, and his body reacted immediately as she walked out in a cotton robe. Every curve she had was revealed through the thin material, and he wondered if they had enough time to fool around before they had to be downstairs. He opened his arms and saw her shake her head as she walked to her closet. "Are you denying me?"

"No, I'm just delaying you." She pulled a pair of lilac panties out of a drawer and slipped them under her robe. "My folks expect us downstairs for cocktails in fifteen minutes, and that's not enough time."

He sat up and ran his hand through his hair. "And what exactly do you have in mind?"

"I want to have high-school sex and fool around."

He laughed, watching her cover her gorgeous rack with a matching lilac bra. "What is high-school sex?"

"Not sure, but I expect you to show me. I didn't have a date until I was twenty, so I rely on your vast experience to make my fantasy come true."

"Does high-school sex include intercourse?"

"I hope so because if you were my boyfriend back then, I certainly would've wanted to go all the way."

He stood and adjusted himself. "Let's not talk about it anymore because I do not need to be sporting a chub when I walk downstairs." He pulled a shirt out of his suitcase and was about to put it on when Kelly stopped him. "What?"

"We're having drinks in the backyard. You'll be too hot if you wear something over your tank."

"Babe, are you sure?"

"My parents don't care about tats, just your character. Your ink is sexy, so don't cover it up."

“Okay, but if we get blowback, it’s on you.”

“As long as you talk to my dad about baseball and listen to my mom’s long stories, there is no way they won’t love you as much as I do.” She slipped a T-shirt on and smiled. “I just need five more minutes, and then I’ll be ready.”

Kissing her head, he nodded and watched her walk back into the bathroom. Was it possible she loved him? Or had her statement been more a figure of speech? He looked out the window and studied the smog on the horizon.

Did he love her?

Probably.

Was he ready to say it?

Almost.

The time they’d spent together had shown him a happiness he didn’t know existed, and if he could hold on to it, he figured he might end up with a hell of a life.

Their days were easy, and conflicts had been minimal. Except for the big blow-out fight over the trip, their bickering had disappeared.

And he knew that was because their arguments during their working relationship had been nothing more than unrequited lust looking for a way to work itself out.

And they had definitely, *worked* it out.

At home, the office, and even in his truck a time or two.

His appetite matched hers perfectly, and he’d be lying if he didn’t admit he’d found it a little surprising. He never would’ve guessed when they started dating, she’d be as interested in sex as he was, and the fact that it was only getting hotter was nothing short of a miracle.

Having never spent more than a couple of weeks with the same partner, he didn’t know what to expect when they hit the three-month mark. And now that they were just beyond it, he was happy to discover he wanted her more with each passing day.

Hearing Kelly's feet against the hardwood, he turned and felt his heart trip out of rhythm. The girl owned him, and why he tried to pretend otherwise was pretty damn funny. "Ready to go downstairs?"

"Yes, I'm dying to meet my sister's man and see his face."

"What does that mean?"

"I've seen his dick a bunch of times when I've Facetimed with Anne, and I'm looking forward to seeing what his face looks like."

Letting out a bark of laughter, he pulled her in for a hug. "Does he know you've seen his junk?"

"Probably." She smiled and shrugged. "At least I know why my sister is always in a good mood."

"Really?"

She patted his chest. "But I'm in a far better mood, that's for sure." Kelly stepped toward the door. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be." He followed her and prayed the evening went well. Her parents had been very friendly and welcoming when they'd arrived, and he looked forward to getting to know the people who raised his incredible girl.

Hell had broken loose at the table, and Cole didn't know what would happen next. Caroline and Ron Morris looked at their daughters snorting water out of their noses as they laughed hysterically, and he couldn't tell if they were pissed.

He looked at Anne's boyfriend, Kevin, for a clue and noticed he was undisturbed. Which could mean he was brain-dead or was used to seeing his girl lose it at the table.

Caroline threw her napkin at Kelly, and Ron threw his at Anne, and they exchanged affectionate glances. Not what he expected as they sat in the dining room enjoying a meal Caroline had put a lot of effort into.

They were dining on the “good china,” as Kelly called it, and he wondered if this was a regular thing. Didn’t seem so since no one had gotten dressed up, and they were eating barbeque ribs and all the fixings. Kelly’s mom thought Kansas City had the best barbeque, and he decided she was correct. He loved the spice and heat and decided it was a lot like the woman sitting next to him who was mopping her face with a napkin.

The sisters had egged each other on during most of the meal, trying to top each other with embarrassing stories, and it was Anne could easily be declared the victor. Her tale featured a dance involving a borrowed dress, a boy with wandering hands, and the local police, and Kelly couldn’t top it.

Sitting back, he looked around the table and thought this was the family he’d like to have someday. Everyone was relaxed, and even with all the teasing that had gone on, no one took a shot or crossed a line.

He’d never experienced anything close and had only vaguely suspected it existed.

Now that he’d seen it, he wanted it.

With Kelly.

And if that thought didn’t scare the shit out of him, he didn’t know what would.

Petrified and hopeful.

Two opposing feelings warred in his chest, and he couldn’t tell which one would be the victor.

“Dessert!” Caroline announced as she got up. “You boys do the dishes, and then we’ll have the peach cobbler.” She picked up her glass and the bottle of wine on the table and headed out to the patio.

Kelly bent down and kissed his cheek. “Have fun.”

He watched her walk out with Anne, arm in arm, with their wine glasses swinging and their hips swaying. “Never saw a smarter group of women.”

“My wife figured out the key to successful entertaining, and it involves me doing the dishes. Considering what an amazing cook she is, it’s well worth it,” Dr. Morris said as he leaned his hands on the table.

Kevin picked up the glasses. “Anne hasn’t done a dish since we’ve gotten together.”

“And how do you feel about that, son?”

Kevin’s face broke into an unabashed grin. “Like I’m the luckiest guy in town.”

“Good answer,” Dr. Morris replied. “And you, Cole, how do you fare on dish duty?”

“We usually do it together since we both cook. It’s a team effort from beginning to end.” He watched the man’s approving smile and didn’t realize how good it would feel.

“You may be the smartest one. I’m a disaster in the kitchen, so my wife wisely kicked me out long ago.” He picked up two serving dishes and headed into the kitchen. “Let’s make quick work of this, so we can get out there before they get too sauced.”

Cole picked up several dishes, followed the men into the kitchen, and couldn’t remember being so optimistic. He had a chance at a hell of a future; all he had to do was walk toward it and believe he deserved it.

It couldn’t be more challenging than combat, could it?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Kelly flipped on the fan in her room and collapsed on the bed. “It’s so hot.”

Cole stripped off his clothes and lay down. “I don’t mind it.”

Rolling on her side, they were face-to-face, and she ran her fingers over his warm skin. “I need another shower.”

“I’m about to get you all sweaty and sticky, so don’t bother.”

“Are you going to do unspeakable things to me in my childhood room?”

“Babe, none of them will be unspeakable, considering how much my dirty mouth turns you on.”

“Just say them quietly since my parents are down the hall.”

“You’re the screamer, so keep that in mind when I’ve got my tongue buried in your pussy, licking up all your sweet honey.”

His words had an immediate effect, and she rubbed her legs together. “Maybe I’ll take you into my mouth first, and then we’ll see who makes the most noise.”

He gave her a careless shrug and moved his hand across her stomach. “Guess we will.”

The rough pads of his fingertips sailing across her skin left a trail of goosebumps as they held one another’s gaze. “Thank you for coming, Cole.”

“Damn glad I did, not only because a king never leaves his queen unprotected but because I’ve enjoyed meeting your

family.”

“Thanks for saying that.”

“I mean it. This is a first for me, and I’m surprised at how easy it’s been. Your folks are great and have made me feel very welcome.”

“Considering your very fine tush is parked in my bedroom, I’d say they like you a lot.” A smile crossed his lips, and seeing his happiness sent a warm unfamiliar feeling zinging in her stomach. Running her finger over the tattoo on his neck, she leaned closer. “You never told me the significance of this skull with the crazy eyes.”

“I got it when I left the Marines. I cheated death a hundred times over the ten years I spent with the corps and wanted to commemorate the achievement.”

“You’ve never talked much about it. How come?”

“Babe, none of the stories are pretty. I went in as a grunt and was cannon fodder for the first few years. I went to boot camp on June 11, 2001, and the towers were hit three months later. There was never a question of whether I would see combat, only if I would come back in one piece.”

“Holy smokes, I never put the dates together. You were just a kid; how did you handle it?”

“I had no choice, so I decided if that’s how I was going, then at least it was honorable. I had no direction, discipline, or role models for becoming a man until I went in. So as scary as the idea of combat was, it was also damn exciting. For the first time, I had a bigger purpose and a way to prove myself.”

“I can’t imagine being able to handle anything close to that when I was eighteen. I thought going to a big college instead of a small one was a big deal. How ridiculous.”

“Based on the world you grew up in, going away to a large school was a big deal. You can’t compare our life circumstances. I know we each ended up right where we were supposed to.”

“I guess.” She traced a scar below his ribcage and the one on his hip. “Glad you came back.”

“Me too.” He tangled their legs together. “My first taste of combat had me thinking it wouldn’t happen. I was part of Task Force Tarawa that went into Nasiriyah. The U.S. and coalition forces needed to go through the area to make it to Baghdad, and it was our job to secure it. It was only supposed to take a couple of hours with minimal engagement. But it was a nasty fight, and we took fire when we arrived. Twenty-nine soldiers were killed before the city was secured.”

“What was the day like?”

“That’s not an easy answer, and there’s not a lot I remember. All I recall is the sound of choppers overhead unloading on the enemy and the smell of sewage. What has stuck with me, though, is seeing acts of courage that I never thought was possible. I turned twenty during that battle, and it changed me forever.”

Studying his face, she saw no lingering shadows and wondered how long it had taken him to work through all he’d seen. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Putting your life on the line to protect this country’s interests.”

“I didn’t have a choice; I went in as a punk who was looking at jail time. But, thankfully, got a chance to turn my life around and do something worthwhile.”

“It doesn’t matter how you got there; all that counts is what you did with the experience.”

“I like the way you see me, Kelly.”

“Back at you, my king.”

“As your king, I command you to enjoy what I’m about to do.”

Leaning over, she kissed him. “Go ahead then and command me.”

He rolled on his back and grinned. “Come sit on my face, babe.”

“Really?” she replied with a giggle.

“Don’t make me say it twice.” He watched her crawl slowly across his body and knew it was time to take control. Grabbing her by the hips, he moved her where he wanted her. “Don’t scream, no matter what I do.” He dug his fingers into her hips and brought her pussy to his mouth. Letting out a moan, he felt his cum drip from his cock as he took his first taste. He ate like a starving man and felt his control waver.

Her hips moved slowly as she dragged her sweet honey across his mouth. Licking it up, he groaned as it ran down his chin. Giving her clit some attention, he sucked it into his mouth and heard a strangled moan. *That’s it, baby. Show me how I own you.*

Moving his hands to her ass, he worked her hips, so he could lick deep inside. She pulsed against his tongue. “That’s it, come all over my face; I want your cream all over me.”

“Cole, it’s too much.”

“Never.” He rubbed her clit hard against his face and slipped a finger in, getting it nice and wet. Sneaking it back to her ass, he rubbed her there and heard her stifled moans. He sucked her clit into his mouth and pushed his finger through her tight ring, and she instantly came all over his chin.

It was too much, and he couldn’t hold his orgasm back. Her taste was too damn good, and he busted his nut and came all over his stomach as Kelly rode his mouth to her finish.

Helping her off his face, he watched her collapse on the bed. “I love the taste of you.”

“I can tell,” she replied as she ran her finger through the cum coating his stomach.

She scooped some of his cum on her finger and licked it off. “You like it?”

“Yes.”

Unable to hold himself back, he kissed her and tasted their combined juices. She pulled him close, and he moved his hips, positioning his still rock-hard cock at her opening. “Ready?”

“Always.”

He eased himself into her tight pussy and let out a long breath. “Feels too good, too tight, and too fucking perfect.”

“More,” she whispered as she shifted her hips.

“Get ready.” He picked up the pace and gave her what she needed. Thrusting himself balls deep, he saw his cock coated in her cream. “I love seeing that,” he whispered, giving it to her hard. He was close, so he clenched his teeth and moved his hand to her clit. “I’m not going to last.” He gave her a pinch, and she unraveled as he gave her two more pumps. Feeling her sweet pussy squeeze him, he came hard and exploded inside her.

It might’ve been a minute or an hour before he emptied himself, but he knew he’d lost his heart.

“I’m never going to think of this bedroom the same,” she said quietly against his shoulder.

He let out a small laugh. “Yeah, guess we christened it good.” Rolling on his side, he pulled her body close. “Glad I came home with you.”

“Me too, Cole.”

Her hand moved to his chest, and she rested her head on his arm like a pillow, and he knew she was a minute away from passing out. He threw his leg over hers and sent a thank you to whoever was responsible for bringing them together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Kelly hopped off the treadmill and sauntered over to Cole as he put down a set of weights. The sweat trailing down his chest made her lick her lips, and she wondered if she could talk him into making out before they left the gym. “Are you done?” she asked as she leaned against a piece of equipment.

“I could be if you’ve got something good in mind.”

She trailed her finger over his arm. “We could go find a spot to grope one another before we head home.”

Taking a step closer, he hauled her against his body and grabbed her ass. “This morning’s quickie didn’t satisfy you?”

Looping her arms around his neck, she looked up and noticed his ice-blue eyes were dancing with amusement. “It did; I just got turned on seeing you all pumped and sweaty.”

He dropped his mouth. “Show your king how you feel.”

She rose on her tiptoes and kissed him, feeling his tongue trace her lips. Unable to deny his entreaty, she opened her mouth and was instantly consumed.

“You two need to get a room,” Anne announced loudly as she walked up.

Pulling away, Kelly glanced over her shoulder. “He started it.”

“The way you were about to climb him like a tree makes me wonder if that’s true.”

Cole laughed and let Kelly go. “Your sister makes me lose control.”

“An important quality in a girlfriend.”

“Are you heading out?” Kelly asked.

“Yes, I need to do some errands before dinner with Kevin’s family.”

“All right, we’ll see you two and brunch tomorrow.”

“Perfect.”

Anne blew a kiss and then walked toward the locker rooms. “Let’s get a smoothie and walk to the farmers’ market.”

Cole guided her toward the front of the gym and gave her a once-over. “Does that mean we’re saving the groping until later?”

“Seems we should since my sister suggested I was about to hump you in the middle of the weights.”

He let out a snort and cupped her ass. “If only that were true.”

“Are you into public sex?”

“No, but I like the idea of you being unable to resist me.”

“It’s not an idea, Cole. It’s a fact.” They walked into the café and stood in line. “You never told me what you and mom discussed this morning.”

“It wasn’t—”

“Kelly!”

Turning, she sucked in a breath. “Sam?” Feeling Cole’s arm go around her shoulder, she shivered. “I don’t know what I’m feeling.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Three years ago.” Turning her face into Cole’s chest, she slowly counted to ten. “I can’t believe I almost married him.”

“Is he as uptight as he looks?”

“His workout shirt is ironed; what do you think?”

“You want to do this now or wait until the wedding?”

“Not sure.”

“Let’s go and get it over with, so it won’t be a big deal when we run into him at the wedding.”

“You’re right.” Feeling her heart flutter, she stepped out of line with Cole attached to her side. Plastering a smile on her face, she walked toward Sam.

Why did she ever consider marrying him?

His patrician good looks made her stomach turn as she remembered how cruel he’d been. Thanking God silently for allowing her to dodge the bullet that would’ve been their marriage, she let out a breath.

“Kelly, what a surprise.”

“Hello, Sam.”

“It’s great to see you.”

“In what universe?” she asked herself silently. “This is my boyfriend, Cole McCallan.”

Sam slid his arm around the woman standing next to him. “Nice to meet you, Cole.”

Cole tipped his chin and remained silent, and Kelly decided it was probably best since he hated bullshit. She put her hand out to the woman and smiled. “We haven’t met.” When she got a sneer in response, she dropped her hand and moved closer to Cole.

Letting out a fake laugh, Sam slapped his leg. “My bad, this is my wife, Greta.”

Everyone nodded, and Kelly knew that Sam had gotten everything he deserved. She looked down at the woman’s hand and thought the ring she wore looked suspiciously like the one she’d been given when Sam proposed.

Had the man recycled the ring?

Who did that?

“So, are you still living in Arizona?” Sam asked as he crossed his arms.

“No, we live in Las Vegas,” Cole responded. “Where do you two live?”

“We’re in Washington. My family has a winery, and Sam works with my father,” Greta replied.

“How nice,” Kelly commented.

“Wasn’t where I saw my career heading, but those are the sacrifices you make for love.” He tried to take Greta’s hand, but she shook him off. “Isn’t that right, honey?”

When Greta remained mute, Kelly decided the reunion was over. “We’re going to head out.”

Cole nodded to the couple and took Kelly’s hand, leading her toward the exit. “Let’s grab a smoothie somewhere else.”

“Sounds good.” They walked out of the gym, and Kelly looked down the street. “There’s a Jamba Juice.”

“Lead the way, babe.”

Once they were halfway down the block, she stopped and pulled him next to a building. “That was so weird.”

“Could’ve been worse.”

“Not sure how.”

“We could’ve had that meeting in front of all the wedding guests and had people placing bets on who would come out on top.”

“Guess that’s true.” Feeling the sun beat down on her head, she let out a breath. “I think she’s wearing the same ring he gave me.”

“No shit.”

“I’m not positive, but it looks very similar.”

“Nothing says I love you like a recycled engagement ring,” Cole commented.

“I’m glad you came, but realize I could’ve handled seeing him alone. I don’t know why I built it to be such a big thing.” Taking his hand, she pressed it against her face. “I’m such a fool. We got into that big fight for nothing.”

“You’re no such thing. We would’ve had to deal with the issue at some point, and I’m glad we got it out of the way. I had to face the demons of not being good enough left over from my youth, and this gave me a chance.”

“That’s a very positive spin.”

“It’s not a spin. As far as I can tell, being in a relationship means you get to deal with shit whether you want to or not. You were scared that my player past dictated my future, and I didn’t want to put myself in a position of being rejected.”

“That’s true.” Looking up, she felt not only admiration for the man but something probably very close to love. “Thank you for taking me on.”

“Couldn’t help myself, babe.” He lifted their entwined hands and kissed her knuckles. “For the first time in my life, I see something down the road that’s more than work. I see a life filled with love, hard-fought battles, hot sex, a couple of rugrats, and a lot of laughter.”

“I like that view, Cole.” She looked up. “Do you think we have what it takes to make it possible?”

“Yeah, but it’s not going to be easy.”

She started walking. “I don’t mind.”

They stopped before the Jamba Juice, and Cole held the door open. “Either do I.”

“Thank you, my king.”

“Always, my queen.”

Laughing, she walked past him, felt his hand on her ass, and knew if she could manage a life with Cole, she’d be damn lucky.”

Cole walked downstairs and wondered if Kelly’s parents had returned; hearing voices in the kitchen, he had his answer.

As he entered, he saw them both look up and hoped they would approve of their daughter's choice. "Hello."

"Don't you look handsome," Caroline commented as she placed a block of cheese on a wooden board. "I'm putting together a few snacks, so you kids can have some fortification before you head out."

Ron stood and headed over to the wet bar in the corner. "They'll need a drink if they hope to get through the full mass."

Cole took a seat at the island. "Didn't realize we were in for the whole show this afternoon."

"The Taylors believe in all the traditions, and there is no way they'd let their only daughter escape experiencing every single one of them."

Seeing the look of distaste on Caroline's face almost had him snorting, but since he didn't know where she landed on the subject, he held himself back. "I was in the Marines for ten years, so I get the tradition. A full mass shouldn't do us in."

"You're a better man than me," Ron commented as he poured two generous glasses of scotch. He handed one to Cole and nodded. "Slainte."

"Slainte," Cole responded. "I didn't realize you were of Irish descent."

"Grandparents came over, so I'm the third generation. Caroline has an Irish mother and a Spanish father. So, if you ever wonder where the kids' fire comes from," he pointed his glass at his wife, "my lovely bride is responsible."

"That certainly makes sense, considering how easygoing all the people from Ireland are. No fire in their blood," Caroline replied.

Ron walked around the island and took his wife in a tight embrace. "Yours is a lot better than mine." He kissed her soundly. "When will we get rid of all these kids again?"

Caroline patted his cheek. "Before you know it."

Cole sipped his scotch and again realized that he'd love to have what the Morrises had. According to Kelly, they'd been married for thirty-eight years, and as far as he could tell, they were not done with one another yet.

"I hope Father Farris is performing the ceremony because his sermons are the shortest," Caroline commented as she moved her husband's hand.

"Either way, it shouldn't be too painful," Cole responded.

"Isn't that ass, Sam, supposed to show?" Ron asked as he took a seat next to Cole.

"Yes, it's his brother's wedding, so he'll certainly be there," Caroline responded as she frowned. "Can't tell you how happy we are that Kelly avoided that disaster." She added a small bowl of olives to the board and then wiped her hands. "He was the vilest man, with all his posturing and fake bravado." She looked at Cole and grimaced. "He was not our sort of people, and I thank God we didn't have to pretend to tolerate him."

Ron leaned over, "My wife hates hypocrites and posers. She barely made it through the few meals we had to share with him." Lifting his drink in Cole's direction, he grinned. "So happy our girl got her head straightened out and brought home a good man. We like you, Cole, and are happy to have you around."

Feeling his chest tighten, he nodded. "Appreciate that, sir. Kelly is exceptional, and I'm optimistic about where things are headed."

"If you need me to talk to her, just let me know," Caroline said as she added crackers to the board.

"Dear, that never helps," Ron replied as he snatched an olive from the bowl.

Hearing footsteps, he looked up and saw Kelly come down the stairs. He stood and walked over, taking her hand. "Damn, babe, you look incredible."

"This old thing." She ran her hand down her dress and smiled. "Just something I had in the back of my closet."

“That’s a revenge dress meant to make any man regret ever letting you go.”

She looked up. “Or make the man who’s got you remember how lucky he is.”

“Always. A king never forgets how important his queen is. Can’t have a kingdom if there’s nothing to fight for.” He stepped back and whistled. “That red dress is going to keep me on my toes tonight. Good thing I brought an extra sword to fight off the interlopers.”

“You two are adorable,” Caroline exclaimed.

“Mom, we may be too old to be adorable.”

Cole slid his arm around her waist. “Speak for yourself, woman.”

“Come and enjoy a drink before you have to take on Helen Taylor’s wedding machinations,” Ron commented as he poured glasses of wine for the women.

“Do we have time for two?” Kelly replied as she took the glass from her dad.

“Beyond the full Catholic mass, what do we have to look forward to?” Cole asked as he took Kelly’s hand as she sat.

“The reception is at the country club, so I imagine there will be a lot of pomp and circumstance that has little to do with what the bride and groom want.”

“You can count on it,” Caroline commented before sipping her wine.

“This is hazardous duty, and you will be compensated appropriately,” Kelly said as she grabbed a cracker.

“Might have a few ideas on how that can happen,” he replied quietly. Looking over, he saw Kelly’s cheeks flush and knew he had a lot to look forward to. Hell, any regular day together was enough to make him an optimist.

“So, what are you two doing tonight?” Kelly asked her parents.

“We’re going to have an early dinner at Mi Piacce and then watch Netflix and chill,” Ron commented as he took a piece of cheese.

Kelly choked. “Dad, do you even know what that means?”

“I certainly do, young lady.”

Cole looked into his drink and did his best to suppress a smile. “Babe, what time do we need to leave?” He watched her drag her eyes away from her parents and raise her eyebrows. “Leave it alone.”

“You’re right.” Blinking several times, she looked at the clock on the wall. “We should go in five minutes.”

He drained his drink and smiled. “Ready when you are.”

“Now, I wish we could skip the whole thing and eat eggplant parmesan and lobster ravioli.”

“Don’t torture yourself,” Caroline said as she touched her daughter’s shoulder. “You’re in for a night of chicken and rice.”

“Ugh.”

“Grab some In-N-Out burgers on your way home, and you’ll be fine,” Ron said as he stood.

“Great idea, Dad.” Kelly stood and smoothed down her dress. “Okay, handsome, let’s get this show on the road.”

Holding out his hand, he waited until she took it. “We’re going to have fun.”

“I always do with you.” She kissed his cheek and then picked up her purse. “Have fun at dinner.”

“Good luck,” Caroline said as they headed toward the front door.

“Thanks, Mom.”

Cole noticed Kelly’s smile as they walked down the walkway and decided he’d go anywhere with her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Two weeks later, Kelly stood in Cole's kitchen and poured two cups of coffee, and felt his arms go around her waist. "Are you hungry?"

"No, had my morning honey, so I'm good." He kissed her neck, took his coffee, and sat at the island.

"You do love to talk about it," she replied, adding cream to her cup.

"Babe, today is our four-month anniversary, and you should know by now that I will never stop."

Walking over, she sat beside him and kissed his cheek. "You've made me a contented woman."

"That's what a man likes to hear." He cupped her cheek. "Where would you like to go to dinner?"

"I could make something, and we could celebrate at home." Seeing his eyes close, she knew he was frustrated.

"Why don't you let me take you out for a nice meal?"

"We've gone out."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Kelly—"

"It's irrational, and I'd rather keep my crazy to myself." Seeing his gaze sharpen, she let out a long breath. "I just don't want to be one of your women that you wine and dine and then get rid of. All the restaurants you suggest are those you've frequented with your harem."

"I never had a damn harem, but I see your point."

"You and I both work a lot, so it's more relaxing to go someplace casual or eat at home."

“That’s a crock because you love having dinner at the Red Door.” He took her hand. “We’re going to come up with a list of places we both like. I make a damn good living and would like to take my woman out and spoil her occasionally.”

“Pick a new place, and we’ll go tonight.”

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“No. I was just being superstitious. I know it’s silly, but I don’t want to do anything to mess up what we have going.”

“You think our bond is that fragile?”

“No, but’s it new and—”

He bent his head. “What?”

“You’ve become incredibly important, and I don’t want to lose you.”

“Fuck, that’s not going to happen.” He kissed her gently. “We’re solid, babe, and nothing will change that.”

The sound of the doorbell rang through the house, with three knocks following. “It’s one of your brothers.”

“Come in,” Cole called out. “At least they don’t walk in without warning anymore.”

“We cured them of that the first time they walked in on us in the kitchen.”

“I thought we were on the couch.”

She stood and walked over to the coffee pot. “It’s hard to keep track.”

“Everyone decent?” Seth called out.

“Those two are like damn rabbits,” Zach said as he strolled in. “Hey, guys. Surprised to see you two with your clothes on.”

“Ha, ha,” Kelly replied.

“What’s up?” Cole asked.

“Got a call this morning from Uncle Connor,” Seth said as he accepted a coffee cup from Kelly.

“Didn’t know he was still alive,” Cole replied.

Zach took a seat at the island. “I talk to him about twice a year, and he’s in pretty good shape.”

“I didn’t know you kept up with any of them.”

Seth gulped his coffee. “Dad’s been in bad shape for the last year or two, and he fell the other day and is in the hospital.”

Zach threw his brother a nasty glare. “We agreed that I was going to tell him. You didn’t need to blurt it out.”

Seth lifted his middle finger and then drank more coffee. “Which one of us is going out there?”

“I am,” Cole said firmly. “I’m the oldest, and you two have full schedules this week.”

Zach rolled his shoulders. “I can move stuff around and go.”

“No, let me. You two don’t need to deal with the crap he’ll sling.”

“It doesn’t always have to be you,” Seth said quietly. “We’re grown-ass men and don’t need you protecting us anymore.”

“I know, but I’d feel better if it was me.”

Kelly watched the three brothers stare at one another and wondered if this would be one of the infamous McCallan brother brawls. Cole had a stern look that usually meant he wouldn’t give in for any reason. She’d been on the receiving end of it a time or two and knew he had no give when the look appeared on his face.

“I’m okay with it,” Seth finally said.

Zach walked over and put his hands on Cole’s shoulders. “You sure, man? You haven’t been back in like fifteen years.”

“Yeah, it’s time.”

“Okay, but you call us if things get shitty. We can be flying down the highway before you know it.”

Kelly watched Cole's eyes close. The day of reckoning had finally come for the boys and their dad. God willing, they'd find some sort of peace at the end of it.

"I'll go to the office to ensure everything is handled and leave this afternoon. Send me Uncle Connor's info, and I'll call him to coordinate."

Seth put his coffee cup in the sink and pulled out his phone. "Sending it now."

"I'll see you guys at the office later, and we can go over anything that needs to be handled," Cole said as he walked into the kitchen.

"Copy that," Zach said.

Kelly watched both brothers wave before walking out and mentally went through her calendar, figuring out what she needed to rearrange. Once the front door closed, she approached Cole and put her arms around him. "I'll get us a hotel and meet you back here this afternoon."

Cole shook his head. "No way, Kelly. You are not coming to Bakersfield."

Sliding her hands on her hips, she narrowed her eyes. "Have you been lying to me for the last several months?"

"No! What the hell are you talking about?"

"I've heard you say several times that we're in a relationship and will handle things together. If that's true, then I'm sure as sugar going with you."

"If I don't want my damn brothers to go, why would I let you?"

"It's not a matter of letting me. You keep saying that you're my king, and if that's true, then why would I not go? A queen never lets her man go into battle alone."

"I hate when you use my words to your advantage."

Setting her cup in the sink, she gave him a tight smile. "You'll get over it."

"I'd rather you didn't go."

“I understand that. But I *will* be going because if there is a moment I can make less horrible, I want to. I know this is going to be awful for a million different reasons. And if you want to make something together, we’ll have to learn how to do the hard stuff together.”

“Why are you always right?” He took her hand and pulled her in, resting his head against hers. “It pisses me the hell off.”

“I bet you’ll get over it when we’re having hot sex in a motel tonight.”

“Fuck, I do not want to go back to Bakersfield.”

“I know.”

“So much for having a nice dinner on our anniversary.”

“No matter. We have many more to look forward to.”

“Motel Six, here we come.”

Taking Cole’s face in her hands, she studied his strong, blunt features and prayed the next several days would somehow give him a chance to make peace with his father. It was a hell of a thing to handle, and it would be a blessing if he could find a way to put down the rock his childhood had caused him to carry around.

Cole drove west on the I15, looked out at the rock canyons of the Mojave, and let out a long breath. Kelly held his hand across the console as she looked out the window, and he couldn’t decide if her coming would save his sanity or make the trip more challenging.

The last thing he wanted to do was have her see the shit he grew up with. His father had been an abusive drunk for over twenty-five years, and he had no idea if he’d mellowed or gotten worse.

He’d seen him briefly when he’d been back on leave after his first deployment, and he’d been pretty much the same

cantankerous asshole. How they managed to have a cup of coffee without insults flying was a thing he still didn't understand.

“Do you know where your mom is?”

He shook his head. “Seth does. He used the intel skills he developed in the corps and all our fancy programs to track her down.”

“You didn't ask him any questions?”

“No. She took off when I was ten, and that was it. Not real interested in hearing why she did it, either. If a person can leave three kids with a man who probably never should've been a parent, then I've got no desire to know them.”

“Makes sense.”

“Why do I feel like you'd like to say more?”

“I've never walked in your shoes, so there's no way I can begin to understand what it was like for you. I support you and wanted to come along so you'd know that.”

“I've never had a woman in my corner. You're the first, so I have no idea how this support stuff works.”

“I stand by you.”

Feeling his chest tighten, he laced their fingers tighter.
“Thanks, babe.”

“You know—”

“Here it comes,” he said with a laugh.

“Well, it's Monday, so you know what that means.”

“You're going to try and super soul me since you listened to your Oprah podcast.”

“I'm simply sharing what I've heard. If something resonates, then great; if not, it's no big deal.”

“And who do we have on deck this week?”

“A man named Jack Kornfield was interviewed and talked about his experience with Buddhism.”

“Before we get into that, tell me how you ended up attending the AME church. You were raised a Catholic and are interested in all kinds of spiritual practices. What made you join the African Methodist Episcopal Church?”

“When I met Terrence’s mom at the holiday party, she invited me to stop by, and when I did, I loved the fellowship. I think most religions are trying to get to the same place, so whatever sign is on the front lawn isn’t all that important. Methodist, Catholic, or whatever, we’re all trying to do the right thing and be decent human beings.”

“You are an optimist, that’s for damn sure.”

“Every relationship needs one.”

“Okay, hit me with the Buddhist truth.”

“The thing that stuck from the podcast is that learning to forgive yourself and others is vital. I might be screwing this up, and I’ll need to grab one of his books to fully understand it, but it comes down to accepting and forgiving the situation. Yourself and the person who committed the grievance. Otherwise, you carry it around like a boulder, and all you’ve managed is to give yourself a lot of unnecessary pain.” She looked out the window. “And looking at it from that point of view helped me think of what happened with Sam in a new light.”

“Yeah, how’s that?”

“First, let me say that I believe in the butterfly effect.”

“You change one thing. You change everything?”

“Exactly. I had to go through the experience with Sam, so I could let go of the idea that my life had to follow a certain path. Somewhere deep in my heart, I knew he wasn’t right, but since it was *time* to get engaged, I went along with the relationship. Thank God it blew up, and I was saved from making a horrendous mistake.”

“And what do you think it all means?”

“Sam broke me, and the way I put myself back together is so much better. The decimation of the relationship allowed me

to change my priorities and gain a balanced perspective. I never would've taken the job in Vegas if we hadn't ended things."

"And you'd probably be about as happy as Greta is."

"Poor woman looks like she made a deal with the devil."

"Maybe she did," Cole responded.

"Perhaps this trip will allow you to get rid of some baggage regarding your dad. This could be a chance to put some things to rest, so you don't have to carry them around anymore."

"That's not likely, but I'm open to the possibilities."

"Whatever you decide, I'm here to support you."

"As long as what you see doesn't make you run away, I'll consider this trip a success."

"Did you talk to your uncle?"

"Yeah, he said the old man was in the county hospital recovering from surgery. Guess he broke his hip, and rehab will be long."

"Do you want to try and see him tonight?"

"No, we can go in the morning. Uncle Connor said dad's been losing his memory for the last year or so and probably has either dementia or Alzheimer's, so I'll have to find a place that will take him."

"Do you want to bring him to Vegas?"

"No way. He has no relationship with us and never asked for one. If he's in Bakersfield, he'll have his brother and whatever friends he's managed to keep."

Kelly squeezed his hand. "We're staying at a place called The Padre. I guess it was an old hotel that's been refurbished. It looks amazing and has a four-diamond rating."

"Are you sure it's in Bakersfield?"

"Yes, and they even have a cool bar and restaurant."

"This, I gotta see."

“Maybe all that oil money needed a nice hotel.”

“Doubt it.”

“No knockin’ boots in Motel Six, sir. Only a fine boutique hotel for us.”

“Maybe we’ll get to have that anniversary dinner after all.”

“We could have pizza and a movie, and that would be fine with me.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Babe, we’re going to have a nice meal and give our anniversary the celebration it deserves.”

“Whatever you say, my king.”

Feeling better than he thought he had a right to, he looked down the long strip of highway and decided that having Kelly along would make the trip bearable. He had no desire to forgive his father for what he’d done but had a feeling Kelly would make him at least try.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Cole walked into Mercy Hospital with Kelly and didn't know what to expect. For the first fifteen years of his life, his father had been a larger-than-life figure. Not only in stature but in temperament as well. He would laugh as loud as he'd yell and hardly ever had a tempered response to anything.

All the men in the McCallan clan were built similarly, meaning they all stood over six feet and were solidly built. For a little kid, a man like Jack McCallan had been scary as hell, and it had taken him a long time to see his father for what he was.

A mean son of a bitch who covered all his fear with anger and belligerence.

Add to that a broken heart, and there wasn't much that would make the man crawl out of the bottle and do the right thing for the three boys he helped bring into the world.

And thinking about that old shit made the rock in his gut do a couple of tumbles. He was ready to be done with the past and move on. Which made Kelly's words ring in his head about forgiving the old man for his transgressions and letting it go once and for all.

He checked in at the front desk and got visitor passes and his father's room number. "Second floor."

"I'll go up with you and sit in the waiting area."

"Thanks, babe. Knowing you have my six is making this bearable."

"You're not a six; you're a ten plus."

He hit the button for the elevator and let out a laugh. "Having my six means you've got my back."

“Oh, that makes a lot more sense. I know you’re well aware of how good-looking you are, so there’s no way you’d give yourself such a low number.”

The doors slid open, and he waited until she walked on. “And why do you think that?”

“Because you’ve got a ton of flow, and the only way that happens is if someone’s confident. And your *confidence* had to come from looking in the mirror.”

“Maybe my confidence comes from who I am inside.”

“You have that too. But I think it also comes from your good looks. I know that if I looked like you, I’d be kissing my reflection and snapping my fingers for the prospects to gather around.”

“You’re making that up to distract me.”

Letting her eyes move slowly over him, she licked her lips. “Guess you’ll never know.”

Pulling her in, he hugged her tight. “You are the best damn thing in the world.”

“You’re just saying that because I sexed you up last night for our anniversary.”

“I thought it was me who sexed you up.”

The doors slid open, and they walked off. “Guess we did it to one another.” Kelly stopped next to a group of sofas and took Cole’s hand. “You are a good human, Cole, and that man in the hospital room knows it somewhere deep in his soul. No matter if he can say it or not.”

“Thanks, babe.” He kissed her head and then looked down the hall. “Showtime.”

“I’ll be here...on your six.”

He nodded and moved toward his father’s room, letting Kelly’s warm spirit and love wrap around him. And yeah, even though they hadn’t said the words, it’s what they had. No doubt about it.

Pushing the door open, Cole walked in, saw his father lying in bed, and felt his gut clench. The old man looked nothing like the one he remembered.

“Come in and poke me if you’re going to,” he growled.

“Hey, Dad, it’s Cole. Your oldest son.” And if that didn’t say everything about their relationship, he didn’t know what did.

Seeing his father’s eyes open and lock with his sent a chill down his spine. “Heard you took a tumble.”

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“See, you’re still the same charming guy.” He grabbed a chair and sat down. “Uncle Connor called Seth and told him you were in bad shape. So, I came out to check on you.”

“You should’ve waited ‘cause you can’t dance on my grave yet.”

He decided to ignore the comment and studied his father’s weathered face. He’d worked the oil rigs for most of his life, and the time he spent in the dry heat showed in every line on his face. Add to that the alcoholism, and he looked like hell, even though he was only fifty-seven or eight. “I talked to Uncle Connor last night, and he said you made it through surgery fine and now have to go through rehab.”

“Yeah, the doc told me it was shattered in a bunch of places, and he put me back together as best he could. Probably won’t be out in the fields any time soon.”

“Not much you can do but heal up.”

“Did your sorry-ass brothers come along, or are you alone?”

“Zach and Seth are taking care of our business, and I came out with my girlfriend.”

“Well, you’ve seen me, and now you can hightail it out of here and return to your life.”

“As much as I’d like to do that, I’ll stick around for a day or two and make sure you get into a rehab facility.”

“I’ve already gone through the withdrawals, and they have me on something, so I don’t climb the walls.”

“I was talking about a place for your hip. You can’t go back to the trailer until you can move around, and since you have no one to help you, a rehab place is the best answer.”

Letting out a growl, he slapped his hand on the bed. “Don’t think you can sweep in here and take over my fucking life and tell me what to do. You boys left, and that’s that.”

The familiar rage filled his chest, and he took a deep breath, so he wouldn’t explode. “I could’ve lived the rest of my life without seeing your sorry ass. You were a shit father, and we were lucky to get out in one piece.” Running his hand down his face, he tried to calm himself down.

“I kept a roof over you boys’ heads.”

“And managed to be a mean son of a bitch who took your anger out on three young kids. We didn’t know if we’d survive your temper until I got big enough to stop you. So, us staying away shouldn’t have been a surprise.” Standing, he walked toward the door and felt disgusted, just like he always did when he thought about his father.

Shaking his head, he realized once again the man would go to the grave, spittin’ and cursin’ just like he’d done throughout his life. Jack McCallan would never mellow and appreciate someone coming out to check on him.

“I know I failed you, boys.”

Lifting his head slowly, he wondered if he’d started hearing things. “What?”

Looking at the wall, he wiped his hand over his face. “My memory isn’t so good anymore, but everything you say rings true. I was a decent man before your mom left, or at least that’s what I remember. Maybe I was always an asshole, and I’ve conveniently forgotten, just like all the other shit.”

Maybe miracles did happen because he never thought he’d hear his father take responsibility for his actions. “I have so many bad memories piled up that I don’t know if any good ones exist.”

“We had a couple of good years when we lived in that little white house on Seymore Street. I was making decent money, and your mom was happy more often than she was sad. We were living the American dream.”

Unable to stop himself, he asked the question he’d had for more than twenty-five years. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure anymore. As I said, my memory is gone, so you’ll have to ask your Aunt Colleen. She was close to your mom and probably knows what made her leave. I probably knew at one time, but the drinking I’ve done to forget worked, and I have no fucking clue.”

The door opened, and Cole stepped away and saw his Uncle Connor walk in. “Hey.”

Connor slapped him on the back and smiled. “Good to see you, boy.”

“You too.”

A nurse bustled in and smiled. “Time to get cleaned up.”

Cole heard his dad moan and figured he hated being helpless. “We’ll go out in the hall.”

“You behave with that nurse, Jack,” Connor said before leaving the room.

Cole took one last look at his dad and walked out with his uncle following. He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms, taking some much-needed breaths. “Thanks for getting in touch.”

“Zach checks in with me several times a year, so I knew he’d want to know.” He ran his hand over his neck. “I thought he’d be the one to come out.”

“I’m the oldest and figured if he was going to sling shit, it could be at me.”

“Nothing has changed. You always protected your brothers.”

“No other choice.” He leaned forward and saw Kelly sitting in the waiting area. “Let me introduce you to my girl.”

Connor nodded. “Glad you have someone with you because life is always easier with a good woman at your side.”

Cole kept his mouth shut and moved in Kelly’s direction. Seeing his father was dredging a lot of shit up, and the old fear of being unable to outrun his genetics was raging in his head. It had been a long time since he’d felt it so viscerally, and he didn’t know how to stomp it down, so he wouldn’t poison his future.

He looked at her sitting in the corner of the couch, looking like a perfect angel and wondered what she was doing with him. Wiping away the thought, he called out her name and felt her smile deep in his gut. The rock on his chest moved subtly, and he focused on the calm her presence provided.

Rolling his head, he told the old stories to take a hike because, if it didn’t, he may screw the pooch and unravel what he and Kelly had. “Babe, this is my uncle.”

Kelly stood and put out her hand. “Hello, lovely to meet you.”

“Connor McCallan,” he responded.

“Kelly Morris.” She shook his hand and then put her arm around Cole’s waist. “I see a family resemblance.”

He covered her hand and took comfort in her affection. “All the McCallan men are as handsome as they are stubborn.”

“I can’t disagree,” Kelly responded as she sat down.

He sat beside her and watched his uncle take a seat. “So, what do I need to do for the old man?”

Connor placed his hands on his open knees. “Jack cannot go back to the trailer and live alone. His memory is all but gone. He had an MRI when he was brought in, and all that drinking he’s done for the last thirty years has pickled his brain.”

“What exactly does that mean?” Kelly asked.

“As best as I can understand, he’s got a syndrome with a name I can’t remember. It’s essentially dementia brought on by alcoholism. It causes stumbling, loss of coordination,

confusion, and gaps in long-term memory. His trailer is uninhabitable, and the doc said he recommends a long-term care facility.”

“Makes sense. Physically, he’s got a long road ahead of him, and if he’s unable to take care of himself, there’s no choice.”

“Going into a facility is going to piss him off, but as you said, there isn’t another option,” Connor commented.

“I’ll start looking into what’s available and work with the hospital to get him moved in once he’s discharged.”

“Maybe we can clean out his trailer while we’re here, so he can have some familiar things when he’s moved into the new place,” Kelly said as she looked up at Cole.

“That would be a big help,” Connor commented. “I’ll have your aunt help and get my boys to haul stuff out.”

“So, this is happening,” Cole said as he looked down at his running shoes. His uncle’s big hand came into view as he put it on his arm. “I thought he’d go out in a blaze of fury; instead, he’s going to wither away in a room by himself.”

“My brother is paying for his many sins, and as gut-wrenching as it is, there isn’t a choice. I made him sign over his power of attorney last year when I saw where things were headed.”

Cole glanced at Kelly and didn’t see an ounce of judgment. Not that he expected to, but it was gratifying all the same. “Seems the trip is going to take longer than we thought. You want me to get you a flight back to Vegas?”

“No way. I let my clients know I was going to be away, and if anything comes up, I have my laptop.”

“Guess it’s settled then; we’re in for the duration.”

“Appreciate you coming out, Cole. I know how much of an asshole your father was, and your willingness to help is appreciated.”

“It’s the right thing to do.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s easy.”

“Nothing ever is.” Taking a deep breath, he nodded.
“Let’s get to it.”

“Your aunt will be happy to see you and want to have you two over for supper tonight.”

“Thank you, Uncle Connor.” He stood and held out his hand to Kelly. “I guess I better introduce you to the old man.”

“Of course.” Kelly stood and smoothed out her top.

Cole nodded to his uncle and then led Kelly down the hall. “He’s going to say shitty things and be rude, so don’t take any of it personally.”

“I never do, and, despite all his mistakes, he did something right because he brought you and your brothers into the world. And I, for one, am very grateful.”

He kissed her head and stood in front of his father’s door.
“Let’s get this over with.”

“I’m your six, so don’t worry.”

He let out a rough laugh and saw her confusion. “Babe, it’s *on* your six.”

She waved her hand. “You know what I mean.”

He kissed her firmly and prayed she didn’t run away after meeting his father.

Resentment, anger, love, and appreciation were fighting to see which one would win. Kelly’s words about forgiveness bounced around his brain, and he knew it was time to grab a fistful of it.

How that would be possible wasn’t immediately evident.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



They'd been at it for three days, and Kelly thought they might be finished by the end of the day. Jack McCallan's home had been cleaned out, and, as far as she could tell, it had been brutal for Cole.

He'd vacillated between rage, frustration, and shame, snapping at her regularly. And while she understood it, the strain started to wear on her. Which felt like an awful thing to admit, considering what Cole was going through. The painful situation had brought him to his knees, and she didn't know how she could help.

Or if it was even possible.

All she'd managed to do was quietly help, hoping he'd talk to her when he was ready. Which might be never o'clock if things continued as they had.

She picked up another picture as she sat in the boys' bedroom and wiped it down, thinking about what kind of woman left her kids. Looking at the sweet McCallan brothers' faces made her appreciate once again how much work it had taken for them to be where they were.

Wrapping the picture up, she put it in the box, they were taking back to Vegas and stood, doing a quick survey of the closet.

"What's that?" A shoebox was shoved to the back of the shelf. Once she had it in her hands, she opened it and let out a harsh breath. "Holy smokes." Pictures of Cole's parents filled it, and she saw immediately where Cole got his arresting eye color. His mom was beautiful, with honey-blond hair and ice-blue eyes that matched Cole's.

She collapsed on the bed and flipped through the photos from the beginning of McCallan courtship to the day Cole was born. What an attractive couple. Jack was the dark prince to Helen's light fairy princess aura. Studying the picture closely, she saw their genuine smiles and wondered how things had fallen apart as badly as they did.

No one entered a relationship thinking it would cause pain and heartache, and she wondered if there had ever been a fork in the road where they could've turned things around.

Had it just been a long series of broken promises, or had some jarring event toppled the family? Three kids, though. Who had three children with someone they had no intention of keeping?

When she'd met Jack McCallan, she knew a terrified man lay under all his bluster and bravado. Fear always made people angry and bully those around them, and Cole's dad was no exception. Lying in a hospital bed and not having control of your mind and body would make even the most peaceful man rage. And Jack McCallan was no peaceful man, that was for damn sure. She'd witnessed him snipe and insult anyone who came within a foot of him and knew it was because he was scared out of his mind.

Hearing footsteps, she looked up and saw Cole standing in the doorway. "Hey."

"What are you doing?"

"Packing up the pictures to take back to Vegas."

"Not sure we need those."

"Seth texted me and asked me to bring back whatever books and mementos we found."

"The baby of the family is always the sentimental one."

"Makes sense since he had the least amount of time with your mom." She held up a picture from the box. "Now I know where your eyes come from."

He stalked toward her and collapsed on the bed, taking the picture. "Shit—"

“She was a beauty, Cole.”

“Yeah, too bad it was only her outside.”

“Did your aunt share any stories that might help make sense of why she left?”

He leaned back on his hands and closed his eyes. “It seems my mom had post-partum depression with Zach and Seth, and it had been debilitating enough for her to go on meds. Not surprisingly, my dad didn’t handle it well, and it seemed to exacerbate the situation. Aunt Colleen thinks my mom also suffered from depression and other things that were never treated. Apparently, having three kids in five years sent her over the edge, and, knowing my dad, he probably made it worse.”

“I’m so sorry, Cole.”

Letting out a harsh groan, he sat up. “How many fucking times have you said that this week?”

Surprised by the sharp tone, she moved away. “Clearly, too many.” She took the picture from his hand and put it in the box. “I’ll just finish up in here.”

Cole stood, stalking out of the room as he mumbled to himself. He was in pain, and she knew his behavior resulted from that, so she put her hurt feelings away and reminded herself it had nothing to do with her.

She was here to support him and would do it whether he wanted it or not.

Cole walked outside the trailer, ran his hand over his face, and tried to pull himself together. The week had been incredibly challenging, and it made him feel out of control. He’d been a Marine for ten years, been close to dying twice, and seeing his old man and packing up the trailer was doing him in.

And he'd just taken it out on Kelly for the twentieth time.

Letting out a long breath, he looked up to the sky and asked whoever was in charge to give him the patience he needed to get through it.

"Hey, man, just got a call from my dad; they need you at the hospital."

Cole opened his eyes and looked at his cousin Evan.
"Thanks."

"You want me to give you a ride, so Kelly can hang back and take the truck when she's finished?"

"Yeah, that would be great."

"What would be?" Cousin Vance asked as he came around the corner.

"We're going to head to the hospital and leave Kelly the truck. Can you hang back and help her load the boxes she wants to take to Vegas?"

"Yeah, no problem."

"And no staring at her ass," Cole added as he gave his too-good-looking cousin a death glare.

"Wouldn't matter if I did since she only has eyes for you. I could dance around naked, and she'd just ask me to move so she could keep her pretty green eyes on you."

"Damn straight," Cole replied with a huff.

"Is this your last night in town?"

"Yeah. The trailer is cleaned out, the stuff dad wants at the home has been moved, and I've signed most of the papers for the new place."

"Then we need a night out," Vance said as he rubbed his hands together.

"There's a decent bar at the hotel, so let's meet later," Cole replied.

"Sounds good." He looked back into the trailer and lifted his shoulder. "You gonna invite Kelly to join us?"

“Probably give her the night off. She’s put up with my cranky ass all week and might need a break.”

“Yeah, you’ve been takin’ shots at her pretty regularly, so she might be ready to get rid of you before you hit the Nevada state line.”

“Fuck!” He knew he’d been short with her, but if his not-so-smart cousin noticed it, it had to be much worse than he was willing to admit. “Going to have a lot of makin’ up to do when we get back home.”

“If you last that long,” Evan replied.

He flipped both his cousins off and then stomped into the trailer, promising himself he would pull his head out of his ass. The sooner they left Bakersfield, the sooner it could happen.

Cole signed the last paper for the facility his father would move into and knew it was the best place. It gave him the option of progressive care as his dementia worsened, and also had a top-notch physical rehabilitation program that would allow him to eventually become mobile.

Walking down the hall toward his father’s room, he wondered if this was the last time he would see him. Considering the week they’d had together, he didn’t see himself making an effort to keep in touch. Not much had changed in the eighteen years he’d been gone, and he didn’t need to subject himself to another minute of his father’s anger.

He pushed the door open and saw his father sitting up. “You’re all set for the new place. Looks like they’re going to move you tomorrow.”

“What kind of hell hole are you dumping me in?”

“I’ll tell you, it’s much nicer than the one you left. The place is clean, has decent food, round-the-clock medical care, and a PT department to get you on your feet again.”

“Sounds too damn fancy for me.”

Cole took a chair. “Make up your mind; is it a hellhole or too fancy because you can’t bitch about both.”

“I want to go back to my trailer,” he replied with a growl.

“You know that’s not going to happen. We cleaned the place and took your chair and some other things Uncle Connor thought were important to your new room.”

“So, that’s it?”

“Yeah, your drinking finally caught up with you, and your body and mind are paying the price.” He tipped his chair back, studied the man’s face who’d caused him more pain than anyone, and knew there was something to Kelly’s words about forgiveness.

He didn’t know how to get there but had to find a way. Carrying around all the old resentments only cost him...and his relationship with Kelly.

The bitter old man in the bed didn’t give a rat’s ass about what his actions had cost his kids, and there was no come-to-Jesus’ moment on the horizon where he’d apologize. “Kelly and I are heading out tomorrow, so our little reunion is over.”

Folding his hands, Jack closed his eyes. “I wasn’t always the angry son of a bitch you and your brothers grew up with. Somewhere along the line, I lost sight of what was important, and being angry and drunk was easier than trying to find my way back.” He looked up. “I loved your mom more than anything in the world, and when I started losing her to the demons in her head, it destroyed me. I was powerless to help her, and as she slowly slipped out of my hands, I was in more pain than I thought possible. The only way not to feel that pain was to drink, and when she left, I all but gave up.”

“Aunt Colleen thought she might’ve been bipolar.”

“That sounds right because when she didn’t take her pills, she went from incredible highs to lows that I didn’t think were possible. Having three boys in five years was more than she could handle. She did okay for a while and then got real sad after having Zach and Seth. It was the beginning of the end.”

“When I talked to Aunt Colleen, she suggested something along those lines. I always thought she didn’t love us and found something more interesting to do with her life.”

“She was a woman who craved excitement and thrills. It took me a while to figure out I would never hold onto her and keep her in one place. She loved you boys but didn’t have what it took to be a decent mother.”

“It’s a shame it’s taken this long to hear she had psychological issues. For twenty-five years, I thought she didn’t give a damn.”

“This is the longest time I’ve been without a drink since she left, so that’s probably why.”

“Fuck.”

“The only piece of fatherly advice I can give you is never love a woman like I did. That shit always ends badly, and you will pay with your sanity.”

Cole sat up. “That’s the worst piece of advice I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s all I got because your mother destroyed me.”

Standing, Cole shook his head. “I’m heading out before you hit with me any more crap.” He walked to the door and then stopped. “Good luck.”

Walking out of the room, he felt hollow inside and hoped if he ever saw his father again, he’d keep his wisdom to himself. Evan walked in his direction, and he decided a night out with his cousins was just what he wanted.

He needed to get rid of the poison his father had tried to give him so that when he and Kelly got on the road in the morning, he’d be his old self and get his life back on track.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Kelly heard a text alert and read it quickly. “Oh, Cole.”

She flipped back the covers, threw on a sweatshirt, and opened the hotel room door.

His hourly check-ins had ended around twelve, and according to cousin Evan, the last two hours had been spent brawling in a dive bar around the corner. “Why did you look for the answer at the bottom of a bourbon bottle?”

The thud of boots pricked her ears, and she looked down the hall, seeing Cole walk slowly in her direction. Evan followed behind with a grimace and a bruise on his cheek.

When Cole raised his gaze from the floor, she saw his lip was cut, and his jaw was swollen. “I guess that last round could’ve been skipped.”

“You should see the other guys,” Evan said as Cole walked passed Kelly without a word.

“Thanks for bringing him back.”

“No problem.” Evan looked passed Kelly. “Don’t go too hard on him.”

She patted his arm. “It didn’t cross my mind for a second.”

“Good. Because this week has chewed him up and spit him out the wrong end.”

“I know.” She watched him tip his head and then walk toward the elevator. Taking a long breath, she closed the door and saw Cole sitting on the bench at the end of the bed. “I’ll get you some aspirin.”

“Thanks.”

He didn't look up, and she went to the bathroom and grabbed the bottle out of her bag. When she returned to the bedroom, she noticed he hadn't moved. A hundred questions were running through her head, but she knew it wasn't the time to ask them, so she grabbed a bottle of water and sat beside him.

"I never wanted you to see me like this."

She took his hand and shook several aspirins into his hand. "Your pretty face will be back to normal in no time."

He took the water bottle, threw back the pills, and swallowed them. "I'm no different than my fucking father."

Understanding dawned, and she took his hand, noticing the scrapes across his knuckles. "I don't think that's true."

"It's two in the morning, and I just rolled in drunk from a bar fight. I'm a carbon copy."

"I can argue the point until the sun rises, but I doubt it would help."

"You see what you want."

The bite anger couldn't be ignored, so she stood. "Don't start a fight with me, Cole. This week has been impossible for many reasons, but I won't let you take it out on me."

"I'm not trying to, believe me." He scraped his hand over his face and winced. "I fucking love you, Kelly."

Shocked, she pressed her to her heart. "Really?"

"Yeah." He looked up. "And I'm pissed about it."

"Why?"

He shook his head and then drained the water from the bottle. "My dad gave me a piece of advice at the hospital today. Would you like to hear what it was?"

"Not really."

He shot to his feet and started pacing. "He told me never to love a woman like he loved my mother because it always ends badly and destroys you."

“Inspiring.”

Cole stopped in the middle of the room. “I walked out of the hospital, knowing it was too late. I already love you, and nothing will ever change that.”

She moved to him and took his hands. “And this is bad news?”

“Absolutely, because I’m in so deep that I don’t have a prayer of surviving.”

“Is that why you got into a bar fight?”

“I don’t know. I’m filled with so much rage, and a part of me doesn’t believe that I can outrun my genetics. Am I destined to end up like my old man?”

“You’ve already proven you’re nothing like him.” His body tensed, and she knew that he had to come to the conclusion himself.

“I’ve got some shit to fix, Kelly.”

“I know.”

“If I don’t, then we’ll never have a chance at the future I want to build with you.” He slipped his hands away and stalked to the window. “My father was an abusive, raging alcoholic, and mom had a ton of psychological issues, and I don’t know what that means for me.”

“But you want to find out?” She joined him at the window.

“I think so.”

“You are a fine human being, Cole McCallan. You have beat every odd and built a life anyone would envy without an ounce of help from anyone.”

“How do you keep those rose-colored glasses on?”

Taking his hand, she pressed it against her heart. “I guess that’s what happens when you fall in love with someone.”

“You...love me?” He turned her and tipped her chin up. “Because that seems fucking impossible.”

“You’re a good man and have shown me repeatedly that I would be a fool not to love you as well as I can.”

“But you called me a snarling mess of a man for a year.”

“Two things can be true at once.” Laughing at his disgruntled look, she patted his chest. “And now that we’re sexing each other up regularly, you hardly ever snarl.”

A rough chuckle fell out of his mouth. “I guess there’s hope for me yet.”

“What would you like to do next?” His eyes fell to the ground. “There is no wrong answer.”

“As much as I don’t want to do this, I think that I need to step back and get my ass in therapy.”

Swallowing, she nodded. “I think that’s a good idea.”

“Really?”

“Yes!”

“It’s not a break, though.”

“That was a statement, not a question.”

“Of course, it fucking was. I’m coming back to you stronger and better than ever.”

“And the snarling man is back.”

“I love you, Kelly.”

“I love you, too, but—”

“You want me to dial back the dominant attitude outside the bedroom?”

“Yes, please.”

“I’ll add it to the list.”

Looking up, she stroked his face. “I’ll wait, Cole. No matter how long it takes.”

He embraced her tightly. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Yes, you do. And I hope that’s the first thing your therapist tells you.” She hugged him tightly, hoping he would

still want to be in a relationship when he put himself back together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Cole walked into Bluenote Tattoo and saw Joe finishing with a customer. He'd been home from Bakersfield for two months and was finally ready to see Kelly. The bi-weekly therapy sessions and nightly workouts in the gym had built a strong foundation, and it was time to see if his girlfriend agreed.

He grabbed a seat in the lounge, pulled out his phone, sent Kelly his daily text, and smiled when he received her usual beating heart emoji.

She hadn't given up on him yet. "A small fucking miracle."

"What's that?" Zach asked as he walked in with Seth.

Looking up, he gave both his brothers a nod. "Nothing, just talking to myself."

"You've been doing a lot of that lately," Seth commented as he collapsed into a seat.

Before he could respond, Joe walked over and took a seat. "So, what are the McCallan brothers having done today?"

"I've got a new piece for my chest," Cole said as he pulled a paper out of his pocket.

Zach grabbed the paper and studied it. "Are you sure about this?"

Cole snatched it back and handed it to Joe. "Absodamnlutely."

"This is serious shit," Joe commented.

"Considering she'll eventually carry my name, it sure the hell is."

Seth leaned over and whistled. “You are taking this to a whole new level.”

“Go big, or stay the fuck out of the game,” Cole responded.

Standing, Joe hooked his thumb over his shoulder. “Come on back, and let’s do it.”

“You sure about this?” Zach asked. “You two haven’t spoken since returning from Bakersfield.”

“We belong together.”

“I hope to hell you’re right,” Seth said as he walked toward the back of the shop.

Three hours later, Cole pressed his hand to the plastic covering his new tattoo and slipped on his shirt. Catching a glance in the mirror, he nodded and told himself he was on the right track.

“You ready to hit it?” Zach asked.

“Yeah.” He buttoned his shirt and saw plastic covering his brother’s neck. “Did you add to the piece you had or start something new?”

“I just added some details to the piece I had. It came out pretty cool, and I’ll show you tomorrow at the office.”

“Sounds good. Is Seth almost done?”

“Should be waiting for us out front. Where are we going to eat?”

“Want to hit Gordon Biersch?”

“Works for me.”

He followed his brother and let his hand trace over his new piece, allowing himself to think about the moment he’d show it to Kelly. God willing, she’d see it for what it was and know he meant to make things work.

Cole set down his beer glass and leaned his elbows on the table. “Have either of you talked to Dad or Uncle Connor?”

“I checked in with Uncle Connor the other day,” Zach responded. “He said Dad was starting to settle in and seemed more lucid than he has been in years.”

“Probably the longest time he’s been without a drink in thirty years,” Seth said as he picked at the fries on his plate. “Bet he’s the same angry asshole, though.”

“He sure was during my visit,” Cole said as he sat back. “Are you two ready to hear something shocking?”

“Sure,” they responded in unison.

“I’ve decided to forgive him and do my best to let go of all the resentment I’ve carried for over twenty years. I’ve let his crap poison my mind for far too long, and I won’t let it be an obstacle to the future we’ve all worked hard for.”

“So, he gets a free pass for the shit he did?” Zach asked.

“No, forgiving is not forgetting; it’s letting go of the anger and resentment you carry because of someone else’s words or actions. Jack McCallan is paying the price for the life he led, and the three of us don’t need to.”

Seth finished off his beer. “It’s a hell of a lot healthier than holding onto it.”

Zach ran his hand over his glass and then looked up. “How do we break genetics and not carry this shit into the next generation?”

“Maybe by having conversations like this. All three of us made it through the Marines, and there’s no way that could’ve happened if we didn’t have our heads on straight.”

Seth snorted. “There were a lot of crazy dudes I served with, so let’s come up with another theory.”

“True that,” Zach responded.

“Therapy has helped a hell of a lot.” Cole signaled the waiter for another round. “After Aunt Colleen told me about

Mom, I was spooked as hell because I thought one of us could eventually suffer from the same thing.” He ran his hand over the table. “But the time I’ve spent on the couch digging into my complex PTSD tells me we’ve likely escaped.”

“We’ve all got our shit, but it doesn’t seem to include being bipolar and whatever else she suffered from,” Zach added.

He looked at Seth. “You’ve been in touch with her. How does she seem?”

“I’ve only had a couple of very short conversations with her. She always jumps off the call as soon as possible. I think facing the fact that she abandoned her kids is too much for her to handle.”

The waiter dropped off their new round of drinks. “The therapist I’ve been working with always reminds me that as long as you face the stuff in your head and not run from it, you have a reasonably good chance of a healthy life.” He lifted his glass and tipped it against his brothers’ glasses. “So let’s do that and make sure we kick generational trauma’s ass.”

“Why carry around shit, we don’t need to,” Zach added quietly. “I’ve paid for my sins and then some, so here’s to the good stuff.”

“Hooya,” Seth affirmed.

Cole took a gulp of his beer and knew he was ready for the good stuff and to see if his queen was ready to return to the castle.

Kelly handed Cecily a glass of wine and curled her feet beneath her. “To what do I owe this unexpected visit?”

“The company is thinking of moving its headquarters here, and they asked me to walk through a couple of buildings they’re considering.”

“No way!” She jumped and hugged her friend. “When are you moving to town?”

“Take a lap there, missy. Nothing is decided.”

“I would die if you moved to Vegas. I haven’t made many friends here and would love to have one of my besties to hang out with.”

“Do you really like living in the desert?” She scrunched her nose. “I’m not a big fan of the climate.”

“The desert doesn’t bother me, but I spent four years at ASU, which helped. Phoenix’s climate is similar, so it wasn’t a big transition.”

“It would be like night and day for me since I’ve been in the bay area for years.”

“At least you’d have me.”

“The only selling point.” Cecily sipped her wine. “Speaking of that, how is the hiatus from diamond boy going?”

“Is that your nickname for Cole?”

“Yes. Don’t you love it?”

“I don’t hate it.” She ran her finger over the rim of her glass. “It’s been two months since I’ve seen him, and I miss him like crazy.”

“How long are you going to wait for him?”

“I want to say forever, but know that if I don’t hear from him when we hit the six-month mark, I’ll probably give up.”

“I admire your loyalty.” She played with the fringe of the blanket. “I don’t think I could do it.”

“He’s addressing some long-standing issues, and I respect him for doing the work. Even if we don’t end up together, I’ll feel good about the time we did have.”

“Do you love him?”

She swallowed and nodded. “I do. Beneath his bluster is a good soul, and despite how complicated it can be between us, I

know we could eventually build something worthwhile.”

“I remember our conversation during your birthday weekend and think that if he’s as ferocious as you say, he’s worth the wait.”

“Please let that be true.” She shook out her hair. “Enough about me. Tell me what’s happening with that matchmaker Daisy set you up with.”

“I’ve only managed one date since I’ve traveled so much for work.”

She rolled her hands. “And.”

“It was fine.”

“That bad?”

“He checked all the boxes but was boring. He talked about himself for a full forty minutes and never bothered to ask me one question.”

“That’s such a disappointment.”

“I don’t think I have the right attitude about this dating thing. It just feels like one more thing on my to-do list.”

“Then it’s not time.”

“I guess.”

Leaning forward, she covered her friend’s hand. “What is it?”

“I just wonder if there’s someone out there for me.”

“I know there is.” She refilled their glasses. “Maybe it will happen when you least expect it.”

“Sure.” She raised an eyebrow. “I’m going to a college friend’s wedding this weekend in Bakersfield, and I’ll probably be seated next to the man of my dreams.”

“The man of my dreams is from there, so who knows.” The doorbell rang, and she stood. “That’s our Indian food.”

“I’ll set the table.”

“Be back in two.” She descended the stairs and hoped her dream was still interested in building a future together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Cole sat in his truck across from Kelly's house and waited for her to return from her tennis match. The short conversation they'd had the previous evening told him that the work he'd been doing was going to pay off.

Tapping his fingers against the steering wheel, he felt impatient. "Come on, babe. I'm ready to start our future." He leaned forward, saw her walking with Lawrence, and told himself there was no reason to be jealous. The caustic mix of emotions churning in his gut was from old shit and had nothing to do with the man he was now.

Kelly's voice drifted through the window, and he took several long breaths letting his calm not only his uncertainty but the uncomfortable jealousy. He pushed his door open and jumped out of his truck. "Hey, babe."

Kelly's eyes flew up. "Cole, you're here."

He strode across the street and swept her into his arms. "I missed you like hell."

"Same," she replied, hugging him tightly.

"What are you doing here," Lawrence sputtered.

He let Kelly slide down and held her tightly against his side. "Whatever the hell, I want."

"She's not interested," Lawrence said dismissively.

"Don't speak for me," Kelly said in a low tone. "And you don't—"

He stepped into Lawrence's space. "It's never a good idea to get between me and my dreams. I would burn down the world for this woman and decimate anyone in my way."

Lawrence let out a huff. “You can’t show up. I won’t have it.”

Kelly stepped around Cole. “It’s time for you to leave. This man is the love of my life, and no one can speak to him dismissively.”

“But—”

“No!”

Scowling, Lawrence took a step back. “If you want to waste your time, so be it.”

He watched Kelly take a step in the idiot’s direction and grabbed her around the waist. “Don’t waste your time.”

“Really?”

He lifted her into his arms and glared at Lawrence before turning toward the house. “Yes. We’ve got some catching up to do.”

“Are we talking or fornicating first?”

“It’s up to you, babe.”

He felt her racquet bounce against his leg as he strode toward the front door and felt more happiness than he thought possible.

Once they were standing in the living room, he took her into his arms. “I love you, and know that if I want happiness in my life, I need you in it.”

“So the therapist didn’t advise against our relationship?”

“No. He told me that people often grow the most in committed relationships, and now that I’ve got a few tools under my belt, I feel like that can be true for us.”

“And what exactly did you stock your toolbox with?”

“A commitment to develop my emotional maturity, recognize my triggers, work on my empathy and pause before I react and that my truth is not the only one.”

“Damn, Cole. I’m so impressed.”

“I’ve got something else that I hope will impress you.” He stepped back and began unbuttoning his shirt.

“I’ve seen your body, and believe me, I find it incredibly impressive.

“I want to show you something that will prove I’m not just spewing words and praying they work.” He slipped the dress shirt off his shoulders and watched her eyes dilate. He took her hand and put it over his new tat. “Your name is over my heart since you own it.”

“Oh, Cole—”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful.” She traced her fingers over the king and queen chess pieces with their names and then looked up. “Putting my name on your body is crazy.”

“No, it’s not. You are the queen of my heart, and it will never change.” He covered her hand and held it securely against his chest. “I let my demons get ahold of me in Bakersfield, and as ashamed as I am, I’m equally grateful. Because it made me face some shit that had been buried for far too long.”

“I’m so proud of you and hope you finally see what I have since the day I met you.”

He lifted her chin and felt a tear slip down his face. “What I feel for you no longer scares me...it strengthens me. I’ll never run from what we have. I will hold on with both hands and allow it to strengthen me.”

“I will do the same.”

“Thank God.” He pulled her into his arms and buried his face in her hair as tears streamed down his cheeks. Holding her tightly, he let himself cry for the first time in his life and felt the rock on his chest finally disappear.

Kelly ran her cheek over the warm skin of Cole's chest and inhaled his familiar scent.

Home. I finally found it in human form.

Cole lifted his head, and his grateful smile slowly spread. "I love you more than anything in the world and can't wait to get your ass in a church so we can make our union permanent."

"What the—"

He cupped her cheek. "Don't worry; I know it's not going to happen next week or anything."

She narrowed her eyes. "We're going to take our time."

He lifted her into his arms. "What say we have a little makeup-lovin' so you can remember why having me around twenty-four-seven is a damn fine idea."

"Are you suggesting hot sex is the answer to marital bliss?"

"It's sure as hell, not a problem." He strode into the bedroom with an indecent smile and deposited her on her feet.

"I want to argue with you but can't seem to." She ran her hands over his skin and leaned forward, kissing his new tattoo. "When did you have this done?"

"A week ago."

"But we hadn't spoken for over a month. What if I had moved on?"

"I would've chased your ass and convinced you that I'm the only one who can make you happy and love you how you deserve. I don't want the wild version of you and will do whatever is necessary to ensure your wild side has a place to roam free." He trailed his hand down her cheek.

"And how can I love you best?"

"Your love roars louder than my demons, so all I ask is that you never give up on me."

“Not a chance in the world.” She held his face in her hands. “I missed you.”

“I couldn’t breathe without you.” He bit her neck and then tugged on her tennis skirt. “Can we consummate our reunion?”

“Yes.” She dug her teeth into her bottom lip and watched him undress, feeling her body soften. “You’re the most beautiful man in the world.”

“No way, babe. You’re the beautiful one in this relationship.” He peeled her tennis outfit off. “Pink panties... my favorite.” Tumbling them onto the bed, he held her close. “Thank you for letting me come home.”

“Always.” Don’t let me regret it, Cole.”

“He slid his lips over hers. “The first time is going to be fast, but I promise to make it up to you on the second and third go-arounds.”

Rocking her hips, she let out a sigh. “Go ahead and remind me why I love you so much.”

“My pleasure.”

He grasped her hands, pulled them above her head, and rocked his lower body against hers. The feel of his thick shaft rubbing against her clit sent tremors along her spine. “More. I always want more.”

He lifted her leg into the crook of his arm. “You ready to welcome me home?”

“Yes.” Looking down, she watched him guide himself to her entrance and shuddered.

“Nothing I like better than seeing my cock coated in your cream.”

“Then quit playing around.”

“You asked for it.”

She closed her eyes against the tidal wave of emotions and let herself be carried off. Holding him tightly, she felt her heart fit itself back together and prayed they could make all the promises they made to each other possible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Cole filled his mug with coffee in the breakroom and felt like he was on top of the world. He and Kelly had a fantastic weekend and were as solid as ever.

Hearing Zach's voice, he turned and watched his brother amble in and fill his mug. "Hey." Zach drank half his coffee and then grunted. "Why don't you get a Keurig so you don't come in here growling like a bear?"

Zach flipped him off and drained his cup. "Don't spread your happy shit on me now that you and Kelly are back together."

"Sorry, no can do. My woman loves me, and I'm about to shit rainbows and fart unicorns."

"Not a visual I needed before my second cup."

"Don't forget; we've got a new client coming in at ten for a meeting."

"Who is it?"

"A friend of Gios."

"Do we know anything else?"

"Not really. He said he was impressed with the Red Room's security and wants to see what we can do for him."

"Alright. I spent Friday and Saturday at the new one, ensuring the guys followed protocol. Sal and I worked together and devised a way to ensure guests are secure without intruding on their activities."

"Bet you didn't think all your experience in the Marines was going to be used at a sex club."

“Adult Entertainment venue,” Zach replied quietly.

“So, you spent your weekend watching people get their freak on in front of anyone willing to watch?”

“Yeah, and it’s not as entertaining as you’d imagine.”

“You deserve a combat bonus since assessing risk while watching people indulge their fantasies isn’t easy.”

“After a while, it’s like anything else, and the writhing bodies don’t even register.”

“Yeah, I had the same experience when we set up the protocol at the first club,” Cole said quietly.

“All that debauchery, and you fell in love with an accountant from Pasadena.” Zach refilled his mug. “How in the hell did that happen?”

“Just lucky, I guess.”

“Indeed.” Zach shook his head. “I’m glad you two put the relationship back together.”

“I’d burn down the world before I’d ever give up, but, yeah...I’m grateful we got our shit straightened out.”

“I’m more than happy to welcome Kelly into the family because not only does she make you happier than you’ve ever been, but she’s a hell of a baker.”

He patted his stomach. “Yeah, her pie is something else.”

Seth sauntered in and cringed. “Why the fuck are you talking like that before I’ve had my coffee?”

“Kelly made a strawberry pie yesterday, so pull your mind out of the gutter,” Cole responded.

“How come she didn’t bring me a piece then?”

“Because I kept her busy. Come by after work, and you can take some home.”

“I’m not going to make the meeting with Gio’s friend. The UFC needs one of us to review the schedule for the upcoming fights. They have two events next month, and we need to coordinate.”

“You take it,” Cole said as he refilled his mug. “Zach has been at the new club all weekend.”

Seth drank his coffee. “The smile on your face tells me you’ll be walking down the aisle soon.”

“Absolutely. I’m ready to put a ring on it and have her bound to me in every way.” He studied two of the three most important people in his life and knew they approved. “I ordered something for her this morning that will prove that what I say is what I mean.”

“Hope she’s ready for whatever you have in mind,” Zach commented.

“Me too.” Having a woman like Kelly in his life made it a thousand times better, and he planned on giving her as much happiness as he could.

Kelly’s phone rang, and the sound of Cardi B filled her car. Her sister was into the singer and had insisted it be her signature ringtone. “Anne, how are you?”

“Excellent. I filled young minds with knowledge, kept Ella from confessing her love to little Fabian, and ensured that all the playground games were inclusive. So, all in all, a very successful second week in the first grade.”

“You are my hero,” Kelly responded.

“As I should be.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yes, I’m calling to get the download on your weekend. Since I didn’t hear from you, I’m assuming peace has been declared, and you and Cole spent the weekend reaffirming your lust for one another.”

“We actually talked about marriage.”

“Maybe we have a bad connection...did you say the m-word?”

“I did.”

“So, I take it lessons have been learned, and you two are ready to commit to each other?”

“That would be correct.” She let out a sigh and turned up the air conditioning. “We’re going to start couples therapy, so we can have a shot at being successful.”

“That’s brilliant because all couples need tools to navigate a committed relationship.”

“I agree and am more optimistic than I’ve ever been.

“We go to school for almost everything; why aren’t human relationships and solving conflicts part of the curriculum?”

“I agree. It’s all trial and error, and most people stumble until they come up with something that works or walk away when they can’t.” She turned into the parking lot of the Red Door. “I’m going to run, but I will call you later in the week.”

“Okay, love you.”

“Love you too.” She ended the call and stepped out of her car, feeling the dry heat. Moving her skirt around, she hoped there was only one more month of temperatures in the triple digits.

The back door opened, and Gio’s bodyguard strolled out. “Hi, Sal.”

“Hey, Kelly, the boss is up in the office.”

“Okay.” Walking past him, she noticed his gaze was on something behind her. Turning, she saw one of the waitresses climb out of her car and wondered if Sal was interested. When he didn’t walk her up the stairs, she knew something was happening and hoped she could quiz him about it later. Now that she was in love, she wanted everyone else to have the same thing and hoped Gio’s right-hand man might have a chance at it.

Kelly sat in the conference room and wondered what was happening with her friend. His usual relaxed demeanor was absent, and he seemed agitated. “Are you okay, Gio?”

Looking up, he gave her a grim nod. “Just a few things going on.”

“Both clubs are doing well; is everything okay with the family?”

“Yes, of course. It’s just that the daughter of a family friend is coming in tonight, and I have to host her while she’s in town.”

“Holy moly, is your dad setting you up with a potential wife?”

“God, no!”

“Mmmkay.”

“Valentina Conti comes from a family much like mine and would like to establish herself outside the confines of the family business. She lives in New York and has heard a lot about the Red Door. She wants to create something similar and is coming to see how I’ve done it.”

Rubbing her hands together, she let out a giggle. “This has love connection written all over it.”

Gio gave her a disapproving glance. “It is no such thing.”

“Have you met Valentina before?”

“Of course. I’ve known her since we were teenagers.”

Rolling her hand, Kelly smiled. “And—”

“She was beautiful then, so I imagine she still is. Unfortunately, she’s got a tongue like a razor, a complete disregard for rules, and a mind like a fucking computer.”

“She sounds horrible; good thing there’s no chance of being attracted to her.” Covering her mouth, she tried to keep her snickers to herself.

“You’re not as amusing as you think.”

She dropped her hands and pasted a sweet smile on her face. “I promise not to say another word. I’m sure there’s no chance of you falling in love with Valentina, creating an alliance that would shake the mafia world, and finding everlasting happiness.”

“And how do you know an alliance of that magnitude is possible?”

“Because of how irritated you are. You become a growling bear whenever you do something that will make your father happy.”

“I disagree.”

“Whatever.”

“Valentina is coming for business, and the time we spend together will be focused on that and nothing else.”

“Repeat that as often as necessary.”

Gio smoothed out his tie and checked his watch. “I have to leave in an hour to meet her plane. The pilot informed Sal they’d be landing at 6:00.”

“We should have you two over this weekend. We’ll have a little barbeque, so she can meet some people outside the mafia.”

“This is strictly a working relationship.”

“All the more reason to bring her then. After spending a week with you and your business, she’ll need some friendly conversation and fun.”

“As long as you behave and don’t turn into a crazy matchmaker, we’d love to come.”

“Perfect.” She tapped her nails on the table. “If you’re not interested, then maybe she’d like Seth. He’s a handsome, smart man, and Valentina might enjoy seeing the sights with someone fun.”

Sitting up, he flattened his hands on the table. “Absolutely not! If she needs to see some damn tourist attractions, it will be with me and not that scoundrel.”

Kelly looked down at her laptop. “Of course.”

Gio let out a rueful chuckle. “I walked into that one, didn’t I?”

“More like ran at full throttle.” She smiled. “Don’t worry; love isn’t fatal.”

“Says you.”

Kelly studied her computer screen and knew loving Cole would be worth every ounce of her effort. He wasn’t a choice, and she wanted to make the most of what they’d been given.

CHAPTER THIRTY



“Kelly, come outside.”

Poking her head out of the kitchen, she saw Cole standing in the doorway. “Why?”

“Because I asked you to.”

“Be there in a minute.” She wiped her hands and then folded the towel.

“Hurry up.”

“What’s got your shorts on fire?” Walking toward the front door, she noticed a weird expression on his face and wondered what he was up to.

He stopped her at the front door and put his hands on her shoulders. “Happy six-month anniversary.”

“To you too,” she replied as she tried to look over his shoulder.

“Close your eyes and take my hand.”

“Do I have to?”

“If you want your present, you do.”

“I thought the show and dinner tonight was my present.”

“No, that’s just a night out.”

“Okay.” She closed her eyes. “Why is it outside?”

“You’ll see.” Cole held her hand firmly and led her out to the driveway. “Open them!”

When she did as he asked, she let out a gasp. “Oh, my goodness. What have you done?” She took slow steps and covered her mouth as she stared at the SUV.

“Come look at the license plate.” He tugged her toward the back of the car.

“M.c.a.l.m.o.m.?” she spelled out.

“Say it fast.”

“Mcalmom.”

“That’s you, babe. You’re going to be a McCallan Mom, and this is your car for all the rugrats we’ll have.”

“You bought me a white suburban for our future kids?”

He gave her a wide smile. “I know; it’s kind of brilliant.”

“Or kind of crazy.”

“Two sides of the same coin.” He patted his chest. “I have your name on my body, got you a car for the kids...we’re on the way, babe, to our happy ever after.”

“I thought you’d get some flowers.”

“Nah, that’s for punks. Not a man who knows where he’s going and what he wants.” He took a remote out of his pocket and punched it, unlocking the doors. “Look inside.”

Her head spun as she watched him open the door. “This is too much.”

“No, it’s just about perfect.”

She climbed into the car and inhaled the new car smell. “He’s nuts.”

Cole opened the passenger door and climbed in. “What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful.” She turned around and gasped. “It has two rows of seats.”

“Of course, it does. We have more than two, and that back row will save our sanity.”

“You seem to have a lot of plans that you haven’t shared.”

Leaning back, he adjusted the seat. “Babe, I’m giving you exactly what you asked for. You said you wanted the whole suburban dream, and that’s what I’m giving you.”

“That was a theoretical discussion. It wasn’t a roadmap for the future.”

“Yeah, I’m going to have to call bullshit.”

Turning her head quickly, she glared. “Take that back.”

He took her hand. “Nope. Not possible.”

“Cole, I did not want you to buy me a big-ass car on our six-month anniversary. We are dating and—”

He covered her mouth with his hand. “We sure the hell are not just *dating*. We are building our future. This car is meant to show that I take your dreams seriously and am one-hundred and fifty percent in on making them happen.”

“But a third row...that’s a lot.”

“We’ll start with two and see what happens.”

She crossed her arms and stared out the window. “I know you won’t want to stop at two, so just give me your real number.”

“Six,” he replied confidently.

“Two.”

He snorted and gave her a get-real look. “Don’t insult me.”

“Three, and that’s my final offer.”

“Unless we have twins.”

Tapping her hand on the steering wheel, she nodded. “Agreed.”

“Good!”

She let out a breath. “I need a drink.”

“Might as well have a few while you can because I’m going to knock you up before you know it, and your drinkin’ days will be over.”

Groaning, she opened the car door and got out. “Why do I always pick the crazy ones?” Seeing Cole’s stupid grin as he

walked around the car made her frown. “You would do well not to look so self-satisfied.”

“Can’t help myself,” he responded, tugging her close. “I can’t wait to see you waddling around, fat AF with your belly full of our love.”

“That isn’t happening for quite some time.”

“Babe, your thirtieth birthday is next month, so we need to get on the stick and start popping out rugrats before it’s too late.”

“You. Will. Never. Say. Anything. Like. That. Again.”

“Fine, how about this...I’m thirty-five and don’t want to be an old man when our last kid shows up.”

“Much better.”

Taking her hand, he led her into the house. “Let’s go practice before we go out tonight.”

Laughing, she followed him and shook her head. “Considering we’re at it twice a day, I don’t think the practice is necessary.”

“But it sure as hell is fun.”

“True that,” she replied as they walked into the house.

Kelly fixed her lipstick and then leaned back, studying her reflection. “Guess it will have to do.”

“What’s that?” Cole asked as he walked into the bedroom.

“Nothing, just talking to myself.”

“You look amazing, babe.”

Turning, she smoothed out her dress. “You think it’s okay?”

“It just needs one thing.” He gave her a wink, walked over to his bedside table, and opened the top drawer.

“What do you have there, Cole?”

“Just a little something for our anniversary.”

Walking toward him, she quirked her head. “The big car in the driveway wasn’t enough?”

“This is something just for you. A man can’t get his woman a present for the family and expect to get away with it.”

Feeling a little uncomfortable, she twisted her hands together. “I don’t think you need to—”

“Nope, don’t give me any trouble for buying you things.”

“But—”

“No, Kelly.”

She let out a breath and wondered what he had in the little blue box in his hand. “I’m not comfortable with all these gifts.”

“Eventually, you will be.” He lifted her left hand and pressed a kiss to it. “We don’t go out often, and I want to spoil you a little bit.”

“It’s lovely, but you know that it’s not necessary.”

“I better just give this to you, so you quit coming up with reasons why I can’t give you presents.”

“You gave me a car, Cole. That will cover you for years to come.”

“Do you love me, Kelly?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I love you too and want you to know I promise to be the man you deserve.” He opened the box and pulled out a ring. “This ring is my promise that I’ll do everything I can to support your dreams, be your best teammate, and love the hell out of you every day for the rest of our lives.”

Sucking in a breath, she stared at the diamond solitaire. “That’s a diamond.”

“I know, babe.” He lifted her hand and slid it on her finger. “It’s a promise ring.”

Blinking several times, she swayed on her feet. “It looks like an engagement ring.”

“Babe, that’s crazy. What kind of man would try and ask that question after only six months?”

Lifting her eyes, she saw a glimmer of mischief. “A man who bought me a car with a third row of seats.”

“Do you like it?”

Letting out a laugh that sounded slightly hysterical, she nodded. “Of course, it’s beautiful.”

“Good, then it’s a promise ring that lets you know I’ll ask for your hand in marriage before too long.”

She ran her hand over his cheek. “You, Cole McCallan, are a rogue, and don’t think I’m not on to you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He kissed her hand. “And what do you promise me?”

“To keep my heart open and show you how much you mean to me every day. I’ll do my best not to let fear get in the way of what we have and love you with every part of me.”

“That’ll do.” He pulled her into his arms and crushed her against his chest. “I love you, Kelly. You’re more than I ever thought I’d have, and I will work my ass off every day to make sure you know how much having you in my life means.”

“Don’t work too hard because I like the ass you have.”

“There’s my girl.”

She lifted her hand and stared at the sparkly diamond. “I wonder what you’ll do for our seven-month anniversary.”

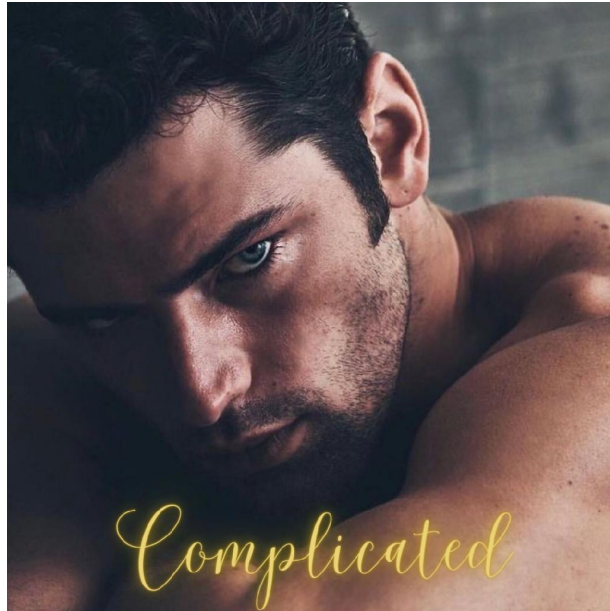
Stepping back, he ran his hand over her stomach. “I guess you’ll have to wait and see.” Winking, he led her out of the bedroom. “Let’s get our Vegas on and have a night out on the town.”

“It’s probably best if I learn to enjoy the ride and quit worrying about what sort of plans you’ve got up your sleeve... right?”

“Probably.”

His rich laughter filled the house, and she knew loving him was the best decision she had ever made. Turns out a rogue is just what she needed.

Stay in touch



I hope you enjoyed the second story in the Cupid Series. Read on if you'd like to see if Gio has found a woman worth dying for. It's an insta-love novella that you may love.

Xoxo

Lea

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CHAOS PREVIEW



Can a first crush last a lifetime?

Come see what happens in this second-chance romance with all the feels.

Mix one totally obsessed mobster and a sassy mafia princess with some sugary-sweet insta love, and what do you get?

A short tale with enough over-the-top ridiculous feels to make even the most die-hard cynic believe in love.

Come meet Gio and Valentina and see what happens when your first crush becomes the love of a lifetime.

It's the perfect escape that will make the world disappear for an hour or two!

CHAPTER ONE



Valentina leaned forward in her seat and peered out the plane's window. Seeing the Las Vegas strip in the distance, she let out a breath. "Ready or not, here we come."

"What's that?" Bruno asked.

Lifting her eyes, she gave her best friend and bodyguard a smile. "Nothing, just talking to myself."

"You worried Gio got ugly since last you saw him?"

She waved her hand in dismissal. "Doesn't much matter if the heir to the Zanetti Crime Family is a toad or a prince because I'm not looking for love." The plane shuddered and bumped as they hit a pocket of warm air, and she looked up. "Was that God laughing at me?"

"Possibly." Bruno picked a piece of invisible lint off his slacks. "Though I doubt he has time."

"You're probably right." She studied the man she'd spent every day with for ten years. He was not only the person who stood between her and her father's enemies but the best friend a woman could ask for.

Which is why she needed to find a place where they could escape the scrutiny of the Conti Crime Syndicate.

God willing, Vegas would be the answer.

California hadn't seemed like a fit, so it looked like it was either Sin City or Florida. "Are you sure L.A. is an absolute no?"

"Amore, we'd never survive. Not only would we be the proverbial sharks out of water, but we'd never find people who could handle our lifestyle." He waved his hand between them. "We don't fit in with all that laid-back hippy shit. You can't

put two mobsters from the East Coast in Malibu and expect a good outcome.”

“We’re not mobsters.” She watched him shrug his enormous shoulders and knew the movement meant he silently disagreed. “We’re the children of mobsters and only deal with the legitimate businesses.”

“I know you like to believe that, but it *ain’t* true.”

“What about the five years we spent in Macau running the casino?”

“Mostly legit, but not completely.”

“Now, you’re just splitting hairs.”

“L.A. is not for us, and you know it.”

“You’re right.” Playing with her gold bangles, she frowned. “All those fake smiles would get to me in no time. Most of the people we encountered acted as though we were wasting their time because we weren’t willing to bankroll their film or whatever.”

“I felt like everybody was trying to figure out if we were aliens or something. I swear half the people we came in contact with thought I would shoot ‘em just for shits and giggles.”

“So, Vegas?”

“Maybe. At least we’d blend a little and have a chance to live under the radar.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for.” Jiggling her foot, she looked out the window again. “Since we both liked Macau, Vegas should be a pretty good fit.”

“The next week will tell us either way.”

Valentina put her feet up on the empty chair. “We’re all set for the Wynn tonight. I spoke with Steve, and they’ve got us in the Fairway Villa, so we’ll be nice and comfortable.”

Grunting, he propped his leg over his knee. “This is going to piss the Zanettis off. Are you sure that should be your opening move?”

“If we decide to move here, then we must make it clear we’re autonomous.” She crossed her ankles. “The last thing we need is to trade one overbearing, nosy family for another.”

“Yeah, but not accepting their hospitality may not be the best way to achieve that.”

“It’ll be fine.” The pilot’s voice came over the intercom, announcing they’d be touching down in ten minutes, and she gave Bruno a confident smile. “I don’t think Gio’s all excited about hosting us anyway, so this will give him an out.”

“It’ll be interesting to see if the spark you two always seem to have is still there.”

“I’m fairly sure the thing burned out long ago. We barely exchanged a dozen civil words the last time we saw one another.”

“That’s ‘cause you brought that big football player to the party, and he growled at anyone within a foot of you.”

Taking Bruno’s huge hand, she laced their fingers together. “Don’t be a matchmaker. Gio and I are nothing but old family friends.”

“If you say so.” He squeezed her fingers gently and slid his eyes over. “I guess if we don’t like it here, then we’re off to Florida.”

“I know you’d like to end up there, but that might not give us the freedom we need.”

“It might be worth it, though, since we look hot as hell in swimsuits.” He let out a chuckle. “We won’t look this good forever, and it’d be a shame to waste it.”

Letting go of his hand, she let out a laugh. “You may have a point since I’m staring at thirty.” Hearing his phone buzz, she leaned over and looked at the display. “Is Sal checking in?”

“Yeah.” He read the text and then slipped his phone into his pants. “He and Gio are on their way.”

“I think they’ve been together as long as we have.”

“I think it’s longer because rumor has it they’ve been friends since diapers.” He ran his hand over his shaved head. “I didn’t become your bodyguard until you turned eighteen, so we’ve only got twelve years together.”

“A lifetime,” she responded as she pulled out her lipstick. Sliding some on her lips, she thought about their history and hoped Vegas was the perfect answer.

They were both ready to move on to the next phase of their lives, and the best way to do it was to be as far away from the family as possible.

Gio wondered precisely how much trouble Valentina Conti’s visit would stir up. They hadn’t seen one another in ages, and he imagined she’d only become more beautiful.

And probably more dangerous.

With a mind like a fucking computer, a tongue as sharp as a knife, and eyes that could see into the bottom of his soul, he knew surviving her visit unscathed was just about impossible.

He checked his watch and wondered if the next few minutes would be the last peaceful ones he experienced until she left the city.

When he noticed his right-hand man’s grim expression, he realized he wasn’t the only one that suspected a storm was brewing. “What did Bruno say?”

“Ten minutes.” Sal raised an eyebrow in question. “Don’t worry, Boss, it’s gonna be fine.”

Letting out a caustic chuckle, he shook his head. “That’s bullshit, and we both know it. She’s been turning me inside out since she was sixteen, and I imagine this visit will be no exception.”

Sal ran his hand over the holster that lay against his shoulder. “Yeah, but it probably won’t be fatal.”

He shook his head. “You remember what happened when we ran into each other at that party five years ago?”

Sal closed his eyes. “Yeah, but what are the chances of lightning striking twice?”

“With Valentina in play, way too good.”

“The intel I dug up says she’s not involved with anyone, so maybe it’s time you two got together and put yourselves out of your misery.”

“I’m not interested in blowing my world to smithereens, and having that woman in my life would guarantee it.”

“Figured as much.”

“Also, this visit is making my dad way too happy. It’s got the hairs on the back of my neck standing up since I get the impression that he thinks Valentina and I are destined for one another. The old man is having visions of some kind of mafia alliance for the ages.”

“Aligning the Zanetti and Conti families seems like a dynastic move. You can’t put the West Coast’s most powerful family and the East Coast’s in the same sentence and not come to some sort of conclusion.”

“Except I’m not part of the family business.”

Sal gave Gio a get-real look. “You may not be in on the day-to-day, but we both know there’s no way to escape it completely.”

“Whatever.” He looked out the window and saw the Vegas strip whizz by as they traveled across town. “Is she bringing security?”

“Yeah, she’s got her bodyguard, Bruno, with her.”

“Let’s add an extra man, just to be safe. The last thing I need is for Princess Valentina to break a nail while she’s in town.”

“Done.” He pulled out his phone and fired off a text. “They’re staying at the house, right?”

“Yes, that’s the arrangement as far as I know.”

“You think she’s here to study the Red Door like her old man said?”

“I’m hoping so.” Letting the tension in his shoulders go, he thought about the incredibly successful private club he’d created and enjoyed a river of satisfaction coursing through his veins.

They offered not only fine dining but nightly high-stakes poker games, as well as one of the hottest bars in Vegas. Add to that the adult entertainment options offered behind the red door, and he had a tiger by the tail. They already had a second location outperforming the first, and he knew that meant he could eventually have several more.

And he’d done it all alone, without his father’s connections.

A fact he was damn proud of.

Moving his attention to the window, he thought about the conversation they’d had earlier and hoped he refrained from playing cupid. The old man couldn’t resist meddling in people’s lives, and the last thing he needed was the Don’s machinations screwing up his peaceful existence.

He liked his life exactly how it was and had no desire to add a marriage of convenience to the mix.

Especially one that held so much political capital.

He’d sworn long ago that when and if matrimony happened, it would result from love. And nothing more.

No marriage to solidify an alliance was in his future, and he planned on holding out until he found someone worth dying for. Because, in his world, it might become necessary, and if that day came, he wanted it to be worth the sacrifice.

“They’ve landed,” Sal remarked as they pulled into the Henderson Executive Airport. “You ready for this, Boss?”

“I guess so.” He straightened his tie. “What are they flying?”

“She’s got a Piaggio Avanti at her disposal. According to Bruno, the crew and plane will stay in town until she’s ready

to leave.”

“Hopefully, this little research trip won’t take more than a couple of days, and the disruption to our lives will be minimal.” His driver parked in front of the small terminal, and he waited while his two bodyguards got out and swept the surrounding area. He nodded to Sal and opened his door, seeing the small plane taxi in their direction.

When it came to a stop and the engines were turned off, he started walking toward the plane. “May the chaos be minimal.”

The plane hatch opened, and the stairs descended slowly. Would the spark he and Valentina have with one another still exist?

If it did, then a little chaos would be the least of his worries.

CHAPTER TWO



Smoothing out her dress, Valentina shifted her feet as the stairs slowly descended. “Bet he hasn’t aged well.”

“I think he’s still called the GQ mobster of Vegas,” Bruno replied as he looked over his shoulder.

“Not helping!”

“Just want you to be prepared so you don’t start hyperventilating when he comes into view.”

“Ha, ha.” Rolling her head slowly, she let out a long breath and reminded herself that she was a grown woman with a successful business. Good-looking men with dazzling smiles were a dime a dozen, and Gio Zanetti’s magnetism was as common as chewing gum.

Bruno turned and placed his hands gently on her shoulders. “This ain’t no thing, *amore*.”

“Of course.” She threw her long hair over her shoulder and gave him a mega-watt smile. “Let’s make Vegas our bitch.”

“You got it,” he replied with a wink. Setting his face in resting bodyguard bitch mode, Bruno squared his shoulders. “Showtime.”

“That it is,” she whispered as they moved to the door. She watched Bruno place his hand on his gun as he swept his eyes from one side to the other, and when he gave her their signal, she took a step forward.

She pasted on a big carefree smile, shook her shoulders, and stepped toward the door, praying that the man who’d been the best part of her dreams for over a decade had somehow lost his appeal.

Lifting her head, she took a moment to look around and noticed there were no other planes in the surrounding hangars. Only two black SUVs were present, along with three bodyguards and one heartbreakingly beautiful man.

Apparently, the Creator wasn't in the mood for dispensing miracles.

Gio Zanetti was still handsome as sin halfway through his thirties. Over six feet of Adonis muscles were packed into a custom navy suit, and she couldn't decide where to look first.

His blinding smile?

Maybe his dancing amber eyes?

Whatever she chose wouldn't matter because the man sent the same excitement coursing through her body as he always did.

Which was damn inconvenient because the last thing she needed was to fall in love with a mobster.

Instructing herself to ignore every tingling fiber in her being, she threw up her arm and waved. Taking the steps slowly, she descended without tripping on her heels and took Bruno's hand at the bottom. Walking slightly behind him, she moved slowly toward the man who'd been her first and possibly only crush. "Ain't no thing," she repeated silently as she walked with her head held high.

"Welcome to Vegas," Gio called out.

"Thank you for meeting our plane." When he held his arms open, she had no choice but to embrace him like any relative or close friend. Inhaling a small fortifying breath, she felt the soft wool of his suit brush against her bare arms as he pulled her against his firm chest. "*Grazi, vecchio amico.*"

"Not so old yet," he replied as he held her several seconds longer than was necessary.

Pulling back, she looked into his eyes and wished he wasn't so appealing. "Life agrees with you."

Pressing a kiss to her head, he winked. "I can say the same for you."

Heart thudding, she stepped back and hoped the carefree smile was still in place. Electricity pulsed through her body, and she cursed the feelings he ignited. Smoothing out her hair, she looked around. “Wasn’t expecting a full welcome party.” She waved to Sal and then stepped closer to Bruno. “You two remember each other?”

“Of course,” Gio responded as he shook Bruno’s hand. “It’s been a long time.”

Bruno nodded as he moved his hand to Valentina’s back. “This one keeps me busy.”

“Did you two fly in from New York?” Gio asked.

Shaking her head, she looked out over the tarmac. “We came in from California. We’ve been there for the last month looking at opportunities, so this was an easy travel day.”

“Did you find anything interesting?”

Looking up at Bruno, she scrunched her nose. “We decided it’s not for us.” When Gio gave her a quizzical look, she ignored it along with his flashing eyes. “We don’t want to take up too much of your time. We’re staying at the Wynn, so if we could get a ride over, you’ll be free of our company.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Gio roared as his hands went to his hips. “You’re not staying in a damn hotel.”

She narrowed her eyes and was surprised by his outburst. “Yes, we are!”

“What the hell, Valentina?” Looking over at Sal, he lifted his shoulders. “She’s meant to stay at the house, right?”

“That’s what I was told.”

Bruno moved forward and put himself between Valentina and Gio. “We’ve got a suite over at the Fairway Villas. Stefano and Steve Wynn are old friends, and he offered to host us. Works out since we’ve got a lot planned. You don’t need us running in and out of your house.”

“It’s not right,” Gio responded firmly.

Ignoring his fit, Valentina gave him her best smile. “You don’t need us invading your space. We’ll be more than comfortable at the hotel, and the last thing we want to do is impose.” She watched the last of their luggage as it was loaded into the SUV and moved closer to Bruno. Hoping that Gio accepted their plans, she waved to the pilot and crew and took Bruno’s arm. “Let’s head to the hotel.”

“I don’t like it,” Gio stated flatly as they walked toward the car.

Tired of his temper, she stopped mid-step and twirled around. “I don’t like Brussels sprouts, yet they keep showing up in salads I order. Sometimes, you just have to get over it and move on.” When he said nothing in response, she slid into the back seat of one of the cars and gave Bruno her crazy eyes. Just as he was about to follow her, Gio cleared his throat. “Problem?”

“I’ll sit next to Valentina, so we can catch up.”

Keeping his position, Bruno leaned in and took Valentina’s hand. “Is that all right with you?”

Seeing the storm brewing in Gio’s expression, she nodded. “I guess.” Since their choice of accommodations had ruffled his feathers more than she expected, she decided to play nice. A little smoothing of his hurt pride would likely pay off since she didn’t need him squawking to his father about it.

Ignoring Gio’s delicious scent as he slid into the seat, she hoped the attraction she was feeling could be quelled before she did something stupid.

Like grab his face and see if he could still kiss the sense right out of her.

No mobster marriage for her.

No way.

No how.

It had taken less than five minutes in Valentina's company for Gio's world to turn upside down. Not only was she doing the unthinkable by staying in a hotel, but she also managed to be a thousand times more alluring than the last time he saw her.

She was chaos...pure and simple.

The moment he embraced her and had her soft body pressed against his, he knew the sizzle and pop still existed.

Only it was more like a fucking firestorm that could rage out of control at any minute. His protests about their union instantly incinerated themselves, and he wasn't even surprised.

In a dark corner of his heart, he'd suspected that what he felt at twenty-one and thirty-one would still be possible. And damn if he wasn't right. Maybe it had always been her, and his unwillingness to admit it was due to how happy the union would make his father.

Could he continue to ignore that Valentina was the answer to his happiness? Not likely. Even if it meant making his Papa's mafia dreams come true.

It only took one look into her striking hazel eyes to know exactly how he'd like to spend the rest of his days on this earth. He'd had an inkling that she was his true north the first time he saw her, and now he had confirmation.

Glancing over, he noticed Valentina's stiff posture and fake smile and figured she was fighting the attraction and instant connection for many of the same reasons he always had. He took her hand that was resting on the seat. "*Mi tesoro, come sei stato?*"

"I've been well. Bruno and I enjoyed our time in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Even though we didn't find the opportunities we hoped for, it was still informative and amusing."

"And what sort of prospects were you looking for?" Seeing her look past his shoulder let him know she was coming up with a lie. Which meant whatever she had planned

wasn't approved by her father. He gave her a gentle smile and knew gaining her trust would be the first order of business.

"We're thinking of expanding the Ceylon Rose and are scouting possible locations."

"I look forward to hearing all about the club." She wouldn't meet his eyes, and he let out a sigh. "You can trust me, Valentina, with whatever plans you have."

Letting her cool gaze run over his face, she shrugged. "Just looking to build my little empire, nothing nefarious."

"Well, either way, you have me as an ally. What time should I pick you up this evening for dinner?"

Slipping her hand away, she crossed her legs. "That won't be necessary. Bruno and I have plans, so there's no need to take you away from your business."

"And what plans might those be?" he asked tightly. Seeing her nose scrunch let him know she didn't want him anywhere near her plans. "I'm soon going to discover the truth, so you might as well confess and save us both the grief." The color in her cheeks rose as her eyes flashed, and he couldn't wait to see how much fire she had now that she was a grown woman.

"I'm no longer a young girl, so you can't intimidate me, and the sooner you understand, the better off we'll both be."

He moved into her personal space. "I have no desire to do any such thing. You are my responsibility, and I fully expect to have you in my care. You can stay at the Wynn this evening but will be in my home by tomorrow night."

She locked gazes. "I always wanted a white tiger; some things, we simply don't get."

"I can get you a fucking white tiger, *amore*. Make no mistake." Slowly lowering his head, he watched her eyes and saw desire and rage battle. Deciding it was too soon to make a move, he rested his head against hers. "We were combustible when we first met, and every time we've been within a foot of one another. Perhaps it's time to do something about it." When

she snorted, he let out a laugh. “I’m guessing it’s going to happen either way, so giving in might save us a lot of grief.”

She pushed at his chest. “Don’t underestimate me, Gio.”

“Believe me, *Tesoro*. I won’t!”

“I’m not your darling.”

“*Tesoro* also means treasure, and that’s exactly what you are.” When she didn’t respond, he sat back and started making plans, wondering how long it would take for her to surrender to the inevitable.

Keeping their hands linked, he decided it didn’t matter much because Valentina would eventually be his.

One way or another.

Grab it here, [CHAOS](#)



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