

Fierce Matchmaking

NATALIE ANN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FIERCE

Royce

FIERCE- ROYCE

NATALIE ANN

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Author's Note

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BLURB

Chloe Grey loves her job at Fierce Engineering. She likes being single because she isn't one for compromising. The last thing she expects is that her bosses would try to set her up, but once she is onto them and guesses who their target is, she takes matters into her own hands and offers a proposition to the sexy contractor.

Royce Kennedy is determined to follow in his father's footsteps and take over the family construction business. He didn't think he'd have the same nasty luck with women that his father did though. Well, at least he has his career since that is the only thing he has time for. Which is why Chloe's idea is so tempting...until he wants to change the rules.

PROLOGUE

“Do you know what’s going on?”

Royce Kennedy looked at his sister, Elise, as she attacked him when he walked into their family’s office building. Elise worked in the back, not up front. He hated when she all but mauled him trying to get answers the way she’d been doing since they were kids.

“You know the same thing I do,” he said. “We got the same group text.”

He started to walk past her toward his office, which was next to his father’s. “Slow down,” Elise said. “And why are you so grouchy?”

He turned and looked at her. “Unlike you who gets to sit in the air conditioning, I’m outside sweating my balls off in the heat. I’m down three guys today and we are on a deadline, as you so often remind me.”

“Awwww,” Elise said, following him as he continued down the hall. “Poor baby had to get his hands dirty rather than bark orders and tell people what to do.”

He turned and looked at the smirk on his sister’s face. “Beat it, brat. I’ve got fifteen minutes before we meet and I need a damn shower.”

“I guess I never figured out how handy that shower would come in when you insisted it be put in the bathroom between your and Dad’s offices,” Elise said.

“That’s right,” he said. “Pampered princess sits at her desk and looks at papers and tells us what to do without actually doing the work. The rest of us don’t want to sit in dirty sweaty clothes any more than we have to.”

He shut his office door in his sister’s face to her laughter. They always talked like that to each other. For the past almost two decades it’d been just his father and the two kids. Their mother didn’t get the life she thought she was going to and decided to find someone else to give it to her.

He and his sister had fought to stay with their father and not their mother. They were of an age where their voices were heard and their mother was just as happy to only see them every other weekend. When she wasn’t trying to find a guy to give her what she wanted.

Royce walked over to one of the cabinets in his office where he kept a change of clothes. He didn’t often need to shower here, but there were times he’d come from a site and be a mess from the dust and dirt blowing around and then have a client meeting and didn’t want to show up looking like he walked out of a dust storm.

Most probably wouldn’t care all that much. They owned a construction company, so it came with the territory.

Maybe it was just one of those things his mother used to bitch about with his father. That his father came home dirty and stinking and she’d comment about it. Not that his mother ever bitched about the money they had. Never that.

Just that his father didn't sit behind a desk for it but worked with his hands.

At least back then. In the past three years though, since his father's heart attack, he spent more time in the office with Elise and managing projects or talking with clients, putting Royce on the site and doing the hard work. Like today.

Once he was in the bathroom, he locked the connecting door to his father's office so that he could shower and get in the conference room on time. When Richard Kennedy called a meeting you got there when you were told.

"You made it," Elise said to him when he walked into the conference room down the hall. If it was just the three of them he wasn't sure why they couldn't meet in his father's office. "And you smell much better."

"Bite me," he said. He lifted his hand and pushed his fingers through his damp hair that he'd towel dried fast.

"You're both here," his father said coming in. All six foot three inches of man that didn't have the presence that he had years ago. His father lost a lot of strength and muscle after his heart attack and recovery. He was pretty sure his father lost a lot of his confidence too, but it was not something they ever talked about.

"After Royce showered. He stunk," Elise said.

His father looked at his sister and frowned. Royce wondered if it was a memory of the words their mother used to say.

"You'd stink too if you were outside working construction in ninety-degree weather. Do you want to switch with your brother for a week?"

Elise laughed. "I would break a nail. No, thank you. I love you both just the same though."

His father laughed. He grinned and shook his head. His father would never get mad at Elise, he was sure, because she stuck by his side. She'd always been a daddy's girl.

"You might not love me when I'm done talking," her father said. "But I've got big news to share. It's going to put a crazy amount of work on us, but it will pay off in the end."

"You made a decision without us?" Elise asked.

"I still own more of the company than you two, remember that," his father said.

When his father had his heart attack, he gave up fifty percent of the company, giving Elise and Royce each twenty-five percent, his father retaining half. His father had enough to decide on his own knowing that they'd never both go against him.

More so if it expanded the business.

"What's the news, Dad?" Royce asked

"I received a call from Grant and Garrett Fierce this morning regarding a business proposition they'd like us to go in with."

"Not a job?" Elise asked.

They had worked with Fierce for years. They'd thought of hiring their own engineer here years ago but in the end decided it was better to contract with Fierce, knowing they were more knowledgeable and had many to choose from if one person was on vacation and questions had to be answered. It'd been a great relationship his father had for years and he and Elise decided if it wasn't broke there was no reason to fix it.

“No. Grant and Garrett are looking to expand some themselves. They found a big commercial building they want to rehab and rent out for office space. Lots of options at this point. They already have Olson Law Firm on board as a partner and are looking to bring in two contractors.”

“Two?” he asked.

“One that does commercial construction that we don’t specialize in. And one for the office spaces and interior that we do.”

“This is a partnership for four different entities?” Elise asked.

“Yes. We will all put in the same percentage to purchase the building. Olson and Fierce will provide services needed free.”

“No way we are doing work for free,” Royce said. “It’s not the same thing as drawing up legal documents or blueprints.”

“No,” his father said. “But we will do the work at a discounted rate. After all, we will own a quarter of the building. It’s a rental property. Those are things that will be worked out more.”

“Who is going to manage all of this?” Elise asked. “Collect the revenue, pay the bills. All the things I do here. Someone has to do it for this property and assure there is enough money to cover everything. Staff to work on the building. The list goes on and on.”

“That is what Olson’s and Fierce’s will manage. There is a lot to figure out. This is a good business opportunity for us. Something I’ve wanted to branch out and do for years. It’s less risk when there are four of us. If you two don’t agree to it, then I’ll put the money in by myself.”

Royce wouldn't leave his father hanging like that. Not when he thought it was a good idea. "I'm for it," he said. "Which puts us at the majority even if Elise doesn't want to. It's no more work for her, as you just explained."

"If that is the case," Elise said. "Sure, I'm in."

He snorted at his sister's smile. "It's going to be work for us," his father said. "We have to manage our other work and this project. Elise will have to figure out the costs and they will be billed at a lower rate. We need to walk the property and figure out the estimates. The all-in project will be split four ways but not all cash if we are doing the work. The work for each office above standard costs will be passed onto the tenant in their lease. Does that make sense?"

"Yep," Elise said. "That is on my end. They need the cash for the building, but the rest is going to come from our services. Got it."

"When do we see the building?" Royce asked.

"I went and looked at it today with Grant, Garrett and Robert Olson. They haven't firmed up who the other contractor is going to be. They are talking to two of them and will show them the building this week. Both are people we know, Royce. Either will be a good choice."

He'd take his father's word for it. "Okay. So not much more to do for a bit by the sounds of it. It's all going to take time to even get to the work part."

"It will," his father said. "But I think everyone will move fast if they can. The hardest work is going to fall on you. You'll have to oversee the jobs and the guys and deal with the engineers and their changes."

It was the story of his life that the work fell on him, but he wasn't going to let it go to his father either.

And he hated to always deal with the engineers but bit his tongue half the time. He got along with everyone at Fierce that he'd dealt with. Most times.

It'd be his luck that Chloe Grey would be put on this project, and though he got along with her, he also got tongue-tied for someone that didn't have that problem much in life.

He'd get through it just like he did everything in life.

By picking up a hammer and smashing his way through.

MADE HER HOT

F *ifteen Months Later*

“CHLOE,” Grant Fierce said, knocking on her door in early November. “How are the plans coming?”

“Almost done,” she said. She’d been working on several parts of the commercial building for over a year now. When Grant and Garrett brought her in and said she’d be one of the few engineers responsible for the work, excitement had filled her over the task.

She loved her job here and didn’t care there weren’t that many female engineers. The owners of Fierce treated everyone the same regardless of their sexual orientation and position.

“Great,” Grant said. “Royce will be stopping over tomorrow to pick them up. I know they are on a timeline and the new tenants are itching to get in.”

“I’ll have them for you to look over and sign off within a few hours,” she said. She tried not to think about Royce Kennedy coming into the office and maybe seeing him.

She didn't always, even though they'd worked together on and off since she'd been hired here five years ago.

Sometimes she did the work and he came in to get it when she wasn't around or picked it up at the front desk. If he had a question he'd email or call, but they were both busy and it's not like his projects were the only ones she had on her desk.

"Thanks," Grant said. "I know Royce is ready to get this space done. These tenants have been more difficult than the rest, but they are taking up most of the fourth floor."

The commercial building project had been massive and the work even more so. Many of the tenants were lined up prior and the work they wanted done was figured out before they moved in. She'd heard the talks that the cost of the construction over the standard was normally incorporated into the monthly rental. Made sense to her though that wasn't her job.

Nope, her friend Megan in accounting was overseeing all the costs on this project too. But she knew based on the amount of work she'd done with this one tenant their rent might be the highest and not because of the space but because of the sheer pain in the ass they'd been with nonstop changes.

"I'm sure he's as ready to be done with them as I am," she said, smiling at Grant. "Though he has it worse than me. I finish this and it's back to him. He has to worry about them changing colors and finishings I'm sure."

"I heard from Richard that keeps happening too," Grant said.

"Better him than me," she said.

"He's a nice guy," Grant said.

"Richard?" she asked.

“Yes, Richard, but I meant Royce. You work with him a lot. He’s pretty easy to get along with.”

“Sure,” she said. “I have no problem getting along with anyone though,” she said.

Which was true. Though she tended to keep to herself, she was always professional. Maybe she was a little cooler with Royce than others because when he was in the room he made her hot.

She wasn’t sure the last time a guy made her feel that way just being in a room with them, but since their conversations never really turned personal, she didn’t know what was going through his mind.

She knew he wasn’t married because Grant and Garrett had mentioned it a few times in passing. She wasn’t stupid either. She knew why they were saying it and wasn’t going to let on that she knew where their thoughts were going.

Those two men liked to set people up. You’d think they’d be satisfied with the couple they were working with now. Megan from accounting and her boyfriend, Jonah Davenport. Jonah’s sister, Raina, worked at Fierce and was married to Cody McMillan. Cody was the brother-in-law to Ryder Fierce.

Yep, they were keeping it all in the family and working this magic they all said they had.

She figured they were just getting lucky.

“Royce, he’s had a lot on his plate for years,” Grant said. “After his heart attack Richard had to step back from the day-to-day grind, but he’d never back off completely.”

“I’m sure it’s hard when it’s your family business,” she said.

“That’s true. And it’s in your blood too. It’s hard to step back. I think Richard went from seventy hours a week to a normal forty at this point.”

“But someone has to work those seventy hours so it’s probably Royce,” she said.

She should have realized that. Maybe he had no time for a personal life.

“It is. And Elise. You know his sister owns part of the company too and runs the business part of it. She oversees the staffing in the office and the dealings there.”

“I did know that,” she said. “Royce has mentioned it before.”

Or maybe Megan did. Sometimes Megan would come in and ask her a few things so she could come up with an invoice to send. Yeah, maybe she didn’t hear it from Royce because they never talked about anything other than the current project they were working on.

Grant was still standing in her doorway and she got the feeling that he wanted to talk more but wasn’t opening his mouth.

“Oh, sorry to interrupt,” Raina said when she stopped by her office.

“No interruption,” Grant said. “I’ll let you get back to work then, Chloe.”

“Thanks,” she said. She watched Grant leave and then asked Raina, “What can I help you with?”

“Nothing,” Raina said, laughing. “I could hear Grant talking to you and thought I’d come save you.”

She started to laugh. “Save me from what?”

“Come on now,” Raina said, moving into her office. “You know as well as I do they are trying to move onto you next, right?”

“You think you’re so smart now that you are happily married.”

Raina shrugged and grinned. “It did fall into place nicely. Megan agrees too.”

“What do I agree with?” Megan asked, popping her head in. “I was looking for Raina but heard her in here.”

Raina moved closer to the door and shut it. “That Grant and Garrett did a good job setting us up.”

“They didn’t set me up,” Megan said. “I met your brother for the first time at your Jack and Jill party.”

“Please,” Raina said. “You know they are pushing it and going to take the credit for it.”

“It seems like that, but it’s not going to be with me,” Chloe said, putting her hands on her desk as if she wanted to stand up and lean into the conversation.

Megan shrugged and then grinned. “I wanted to do it myself, but Jonah is a bit bullheaded. If his name comes up they are always pushing more.”

She should have thought of that herself. It just wasn’t going to work for her. She was going to keep her lips sealed on her personal life.

“Good move,” she admitted. “And it seems to be working.”

“I came in to save Chloe. Grant was fishing and Chloe isn’t ready to bite on anything. I could tell by her tone she

didn't want to push Grant out of her office but didn't want to talk about it either. But you can talk to us."

"I don't have anything to say," she said.

"Come on now," Megan said. "There is no one you have your eye on?"

There was no reason to lie. "Maybe," she said. "But there is no way I'm telling anyone in this office where there are big ears."

"What?" Megan said, laughing. "We tell you everything."

"No," she said. "Raina didn't tell us about Cody for a while."

"She's right," Raina said.

"I told you about Jonah pretty early. How he's rough around the edges. He's not rugged like he's going to go out and swing a hammer and get dirty but he'd mop the floor with someone so that's dirty in his own right."

Jonah owned a gym and trained MMA fighters and boxers. Not too many would mess with him, she was sure.

"Sounds like you've put a lot of thought into this," Chloe said.

"That isn't your type?" Raina asked. "Is that the problem? You like the suit-and-tie guy?"

"God no," she said. "Or I don't know. It seems like it doesn't matter their career or what they wear to me. I just have horrible luck with men. I want someone that doesn't crowd me too much and lets me do my own thing."

"Oh, because you are so busy with all your friends," Megan said, grinning.

“I can’t help it if all my close friends are getting lucky and left me out in the cold. Now I’m busy binge watching TV at night. What if I like a show this fictional guy doesn’t? I’m not giving up watching something because they don’t like it.”

Both girls started to laugh at her. “We have more than one TV in our house,” Raina said. “Cody and I don’t watch the same thing all the time.”

She looked at Megan. “Don’t look at me. I don’t see Jonah enough to worry about that.”

“And you are okay with that?” she asked.

“Yeah. Like you, I don’t want someone in my space all the time either. It sounds to me you are just making excuses though.”

“Whatever,” she said. “If you two don’t have a work conversation for me I’ve got to get this done so Royce can pick it up tomorrow.”

“Let’s go, Megan,” Raina said, smirking. “Chloe needs to figure this out on her own.”

“Nothing to figure out,” she said. “I’ve got work to do.”

Both girls left and she did what she said she was going to. She got to work and tried to push Royce from her mind. Too bad it never seemed to happen.



“DID YOU GET ANYWHERE?” Garrett asked Grant before he could sit down in his office. He’d rushed in and shut the door behind the two of them.

“No,” Grant said. “She’s like a vault. Either the two of them are extremely clueless to the potential we see or we are way off.”

“We aren’t off on this one,” he said. “No way. We’ve been watching the two of them look at each other for years when they worked together. We noticed it a long time ago.”

“I know,” Grant said. “That’s part of the reason we named her to this project. Not that we wouldn’t have done it regardless based on her work alone, but it’s been over a year and nothing from these two.”

He sighed. “I never expected it to be this hard. I talked to Richard a few weeks ago and he said Royce never slows down to even want to meet a woman.”

“I can’t believe you told Richard that we thought Chloe and Royce would be perfect for each other,” Grant said.

“I know. Normally you’re the one with the loose lips, but this time I couldn’t help it. Maybe it had more to do with hoping Richard could push on his end. This is getting tiring, don’t you think? I thought for sure something would have been going with those two before Megan.”

“I know,” Grant said. “Royce is going to come get the new plans tomorrow. I’m going to make sure he has to get them in Chloe’s office. We just have to figure out how to keep putting them together and hope sparks fly.”

“Might be time for a field trip to the site when we know Royce is there too. Nothing like watching someone in action to see if it works.”

Grant started to laugh at him. “I don’t know what goes through your mind half the time.”

“Don’t knock it,” he said. “Sometimes we might have to get out of this little box we are in. I’m running out of ideas. Do you have anything better?”

“Sadly, no,” Grant said. “Let’s see what tomorrow brings before we try that.”

If they didn’t see anything soon, they were going to have to change tactics. Once Royce got these plans from Megan the two of them might not cross paths again until they got another tenant for one of the other open spaces. They were running out of time and space.

TOTALLY WORTH IT

““ **A**re you here to see Grant?”

“No,” Royce said. He stopped at the front desk hoping to get the blueprints and be on his way. “I’m just picking up the revised blueprints he had for me.”

“I’m sorry,” the woman said, looking around. “There isn’t anything up here for you. Normally they give them to me. Guess he wanted to talk to you.”

“Thanks,” he said. “If you can let him know I’m here then.”

Royce stood there and waited while the receptionist picked up the phone and called back to Grant, but he wasn’t answering. “Let me just try Garrett and see if he knows where Grant is.”

“Sure,” he said. He was trying to figure everything out in his head that he had to get done today.

He had five different projects going at once. Two at the same building so that helped somewhat and three spread out in Durham. His father was going to stop at one of them today to check in on it and take that off his list, but the other four were

on him to either stop and get an idea of if everyone was on time or at least reach out to the foreman to talk.

He'd rather do it in person, which was why he'd stopped at one on his way here. He'd tackle the other two at once and leave himself the fourth before the end of his day.

Damn fall and shorter days meant not as much work was getting done. It might mean fewer hours for him running around, but it didn't seem it when he was in his office late at night or doing work from home.

"Sorry," she said. "Garrett isn't answering either. They must be in a meeting. Chloe is the engineer on this, correct? Let me see if she has the blueprints."

"Thanks," he said.

Great, he thought. He wanted to try to avoid seeing Chloe because it felt as if he had to mentally prepare himself for those encounters half the time.

Which was stupid when he never cared all that much around women.

It's not like he had time for one. When he tried to date it never worked out. He couldn't balance work and them and gave up trying.

"Chloe is in her office. She said she gave the blueprints to Grant yesterday and would try to track him down to get them for you. She apologized."

"No problem," he said. At least he could wait up here for them.

He was waiting a good ten minutes when Chloe came rushing up to the front looking flustered.

Her brown hair was blowing about her face with her brisk walk...more like march...to the front. She had on navy pants, a white and navy shirt that buttoned down the front and navy pumps. He wasn't sure if he noticed she wore heels before.

He could have been too busy looking at her face and trying to focus on her words since his mind always wanted to go in other directions.

"I'm so sorry," Chloe said. "I gave Grant the blueprints yesterday afternoon and thought he left them up here for you. I just went into his office and don't see them where they are normally kept and I'm trying to track him down. I just wanted to let you know."

"No problem," he said.

Ten minutes wasn't the end of the world. He'd just been hoping to stop in, but most times Grant would want to talk to him if he could.

He watched Chloe rush away back down the hall. The receptionist said, "She's probably checking in everyone's office for him."

"What?" he asked.

"Chloe is probably popping her head in everyone's office looking for Grant. He could be on another floor though. She'll end up having to call him."

"It's fine," he said. "I didn't say when I'd be here and maybe I should have been more specific. As I said, normally they are just left here for me to pick up."

Five more minutes went by and the phone rang at the front. "Chloe said she found them and she'd be up in a minute."

“I’ll just go back and grab them if it’s all right. She probably got her exercise in for the day.”

He moved past the desk and went down the hall. He knew where Chloe’s office was and knocked on the open doorframe.

“Oh, hi,” Chloe said. “I was just going to bring them up, but I wanted to double-check they were signed. I mean I know Grant would have done it, but after racing around looking for them and finding out they were in his office in another spot, I just have to be positive.”

“It’s fine,” he said.

She had them on her desk and was looking everything over, then flipping them back. “Do you want to see the changes before you leave? You might have some questions.”

“It’s probably smart if I do that,” he said, moving closer to her desk.

She was standing and her head was down, her hands on the papers. Small womanly hands bare of nail polish and rings. He tried not to inhale the clean floral scent of her hair. She didn’t seem the type to wear perfume and this was more shampoo he was guessing.

“I removed these three walls,” she said. “Now they’ve got two bigger offices side by side with a bathroom for them to share. Not sure why they wanted a shower in there, but more power to them.”

He started to laugh. “I’ve got one in my office.”

“Really?” she asked, turning to look up at him. He hadn’t realized her eyes were so light. They were almost golden surrounded by long black lashes. Why hadn’t he noticed that before?

“Yeah,” he said. “The last thing I want to do is go to a client meeting smelling like I’ve been carrying two-by-fours for hours or have stained clothes.”

“So you shower at work?” she asked.

“I’ve been known to do it. More in the summer. This time of year, not much. My office and my father’s are set up like this. The bathroom between us.”

“I can see the benefit of having my own bathroom,” she said. “Who doesn’t want that?”

“Not many people care that much.”

“I think you’re wrong,” she said. “I know a lot of women who don’t like to share bathrooms.”

“You’re probably right. Guys don’t care all that much. In this case I just didn’t want to have to worry about someone coming in when I was showering.”

He saw the blush fill her face and wondered how they got talking about this. “That could be embarrassing,” she said. “I personally like to shower in a house not an office or even a gym.”

“A gym,” he said. “Who the hell has time for that?”

Her eyes moved over his arms. “Doesn’t seem like you need one.”

Okay. Things were getting a little interesting. Or a little more interesting than ever before. “I don’t think I ever sit still. I’m a pro at eating dinner standing up and walking around.”

“That stinks,” she said. “You can’t enjoy it that way.”

“I’m not sure how much I enjoy a sandwich or something I pop in the microwave. Oh, pizza too. That is a good one to eat

standing up. That way if the sauce drips it's on the floor.”

She laughed. It might have been the first time he'd heard it and he wasn't even trying. He was just stating a fact and wondered if he was sounding more like an idiot than anything else.

“There is that,” she said. “I might have to try it the next time I have sauce. At least I know not to wear white anymore with it. That is like a magnet.”

“I don't own a white shirt. I can't keep them clean.”

She smiled and then looked back down to the papers and shifted them so he figured now he was coming off like a slob. Talking about having to shower at work, eating standing up and dropping food on the floor. What the hell? No wonder he was still single.

“Let me show you the other two changes and then you can go try to keep your clothes clean for the day.”

He laughed. There wasn't much more he could say to it.

“There you are.”

He turned and looked at Grant Fierce in the doorway. The older man, who was younger than his father, stood an inch taller than his six-foot-three-inch frame. In his youth he'd bet Grant was more intimidating than he was now.

“Hi, Grant,” he said, walking forward to shake hands.

“Royce. Sorry we kept you waiting. I was meeting with Garrett downstairs and am not sure where my mind was to forget to bring the blueprints up front for you. I don't even know how they ended up where they did, Chloe. Sorry about you running around trying to find them.”

“Not a problem,” she said. “I knew they were in the building, but I just had to locate them.”

“Everything look good?” Grant asked him.

“Looks great,” he said. “Chloe always does a good job with them.”

“Thanks,” she said. “Now we’ll see how many more changes they make.”

“Don’t jinx this,” he said.

“Hopefully the changes are just finishing touches and not structural then,” she said.

Royce groaned. “I’ve lost track of what has been changed so far. Thankfully they get to us before we order it. I’ve got to sit down with them on Monday to get everything set and tell them we are starting work and these are final.”

Grant grinned. “You do have the hard part to handle. We don’t normally deal with the client as much as Robert and Walker do.”

The Olsons’ firm and their office dealt with all clients and had a real estate agent they worked with too. He wasn’t sure who had the easier job in all of this. Maybe the commercial contractor who had to do all the windows and roofs, the foundation. They did their work early on before any of his could be done. They weren’t really involved much now other than everyone agreeing on new tenants or if the overall building structure had issues, then McCarthy’s would give their vote like the rest of them.

“We are all putting our part in,” he said.

Royce knew that and this was a lot of revenue for his company. The more work tenants wanted when requesting

personalized space, the more rent they would pay. At this point they were making money both ways. One on the construction cost and two on the rent. The costs were discounted because they'd get it back in the rent, but it was still revenue no matter how you looked at it.

“We are,” Grant said. “Or Chloe is for us.”

“If you don't have any more questions, I'll let you get going,” she said. “You can call if you do have questions though.”

“Call us any time,” Grant said. “You've got all our personal numbers. I believe Chloe's was on the list of contacts too if something comes up after hours.”

He had noticed it there once but tried not to bother anyone after hours. Most of the time it could wait until the next day.

“I did see them all. Thanks.”

Chloe was rolling the plans back up and putting them in the tube to hand him. “Bye,” she said.

He turned to walk out, Grant moving out of the way, and he went about his day and hoped to catch up for the time he'd lost here.

It was totally worth it though.

Until he got to his truck and realized the asinine things he'd said in the conversation he had with her.



GRANT RUSHED to Garrett's office and shut the door.

“It worked.”

“Did it?” Garrett asked. “How do you know? I think it was stupid we were hiding in here with the lights off while Chloe was running around trying to find the plans you hid.”

“I didn’t hide them,” he argued. “I just put them on a different shelf that she wouldn’t look at.”

“Because you have a shelf for projects for her,” Garrett said.

“Yes. This went into another one,” he said. “I will admit I felt bad hiding in here while the phones were ringing and we could hear Chloe asking people where we were.”

Garrett laughed. “Sorry. I know it was my idea, but as you said, it worked.”

He’d thought his brother was nuts when he came up with this idea yesterday, but it had merit. “I overheard them talking before I got to Chloe’s office.”

“You always were good at eavesdropping on conversations.”

“It has merit too,” he said.

“What did you hear?”

“They had more of a personal conversation this time.” He told his brother about Royce’s comments on showering at work and eating standing up. Chloe making comments back in her dry wit, then some silence. “I wish I could have been a fly on the wall. When I finally knocked on the door there were sparks flying enough I thought the blueprints were going to catch fire.”

“Why the hell isn’t either one of them making a move?” Garrett asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine. But I heard and saw enough that next week I think we need a field trip. We’ve got to keep putting these two together. One of the sparks is going to ignite. It has to.”

“One can hope.”

ON HER OWN

Chloe had her lunch in her hand and walked into the small cafeteria on the fourth floor where her office was located. She noticed Raina and Megan laughing at a table by themselves and made her way there. “What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Megan called my brother a meathead,” Raina said.

“I’ve seen him,” Chloe said. “He looks like one, but we know Megan wouldn’t be able to be around anyone that couldn’t understand her jokes.”

“That’s right,” Megan said. “Jonah is great.”

“You both suck,” Chloe said, pulling her lunch out to start eating. Might as well get comfortable and listen to her friends talk about their love lives. It was the only way she got to be somewhat close to one. “I didn’t mind being single when there were more of us, but the number is dwindling.”

“Ladies,” Garrett asked, moving over, “did you all have a nice holiday?”

“We did,” Megan said. “I believe you heard.”

Garrett winked at Megan. “I have to ask now and again since I don’t get to see you two together. Need to make sure that bull is still being directed properly.”

“Shhh,” Megan said, grinning. “Don’t say that in front of Raina.”

Raina grinned. “My brother only goes where he wants to go. I know that more than anyone.”

“And how was your Thanksgiving, Chloe?” Garrett asked. “Spend it with anyone special?”

“The only people I seem to spend any time with are those with the same last name as me,” she said. “Unless they are coworkers, and sadly, they are the same sex as me.”

“You might need to do something about that,” Garrett said.

“I’m good the way I am,” Chloe said.

Garrett moved off after that and started to talk to other employees. “Oh no. I think you’re next,” Megan said.

“No way,” she said. “No reason for me to be. I’m just another employee to them. It’s not like they’ve got any family members left. Besides. I’m not sure I like the idea of it all. No offense.”

“None taken,” Raina said.

“Nope,” Megan said. “I’m not family either.”

“But Cody is family so that is where Raina came into play. Then Jonah to Raina. Still sort of family,” she said.

“Jonah and I got here ourselves,” Megan said, lifting her chin.

“With advice from Garrett and Grant,” Raina said. “Don’t kid yourself.”

“You asked for their advice?” she asked. Chloe shouldn’t have been surprised. That was totally a Megan move. Might be

a move she'd make too if she thought she needed help, but in her personal life she was on her own and liked it that way.

If her parents complained that she'd never settle down she didn't care. She'd seen her brother's marriage fall apart years ago because he didn't pay enough attention to his wife.

She thought Dane spent more than enough time with his wife and kids. More than she'd do, but it was never enough for her ex-sister-in-law that was out of their lives.

Well, not out of Dane's life, but her brother had to figure that out. At least Dane had his kids this Thanksgiving so she got to spend it with family. Like she'd told Garrett, everyone with the same last name as her.

"Maybe," Megan said slyly.

"Good for you," she said. "Didn't think anyone had the balls to do that other than family."

"If my brother-in-law is to be believed, I'm going to grow some soon with all the muscles I've built and look like a man," Megan said.

"Megan!" Raina said, laughing.

"Sorry. I couldn't resist."

"Do I even want to know?" she asked. "I think you are far from being a man. Flex for me and I'll let you know."

Megan pulled her sleeve up and flexed because she knew it'd embarrass Raina that so many people were looking at them. "Not bad, huh?"

"I'm getting slightly turned on," Chloe said. "Maybe you are turning into a man."

“You two are horrible,” Raina said, smiling and standing up with the remains of her lunch. “I’m going back to my office.”

“She’s so easy,” Megan said to her.

“She really is. But is her brother easy?” she asked. Sometimes this was fun too because she did miss spending time with a guy. Feeling one against her body. If she closed her eyes she kept seeing Royce and wished that wasn’t the case but not much she could do about it.

Guess the body wanted what it wanted, but it seemed like she might be on her own there.

“There isn’t anything easy about either of her brothers. I’m assuming you are asking about the one I’m spending time with.”

“Of course,” she said.

“Yeah, Jonah isn’t easy, but we are making it work our way.”

“Then that is all that matters,” she said. “You’re way ahead of me.”

The two of them were eating their lunch when Grant came over. It seemed to her that the Fierce men were making their way around the tables.

“Ladies,” Grant said. “How are you doing?”

“Good, Grant,” she said. “How was your holiday?”

“It was good,” Grant said. “And yours?”

“We just got done telling your brother about it,” Megan said, laughing.

Grant frowned and she wasn't sure what that was about, then he smiled. "I didn't realize Garrett was in here talking to everyone. But you know we do love to talk to our staff."

"You do," she said.

Grant watched the two of them eating and eying each other, then turned. "Looks like Garrett is waving me over. Enjoy your lunch."

She turned to see Garrett in the doorway flagging Grant down. "Wonder what that was about?"

"With those two? I'm sure it's feeling you out," Megan said. "It's just funny they both did it at the same time. I wonder who they might have in mind for you."

"No one," she said. "You're nuts."

"I don't think so," Megan said. "But you keep telling yourself that if you want."



"WHAT IS GOING ON?" Grant asked him when he made his way across the cafeteria. "You're waving like you're trying to land a plane."

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't want to have you blow it."

"Blow what?" Grant asked.

"I was talking to them earlier. I wanted to check in with Megan in regards to Jonah and since Chloe was there I figured it was a two for one."

"And?" Grant asked. "Did you get anywhere?"

"No," he said. "Walk with me."

The two of them stopped talking but made sure no one was around when they said the few words they had.

“What did you find out?” Grant asked.

“Nothing in terms of Chloe other than she spent the holiday with her family and made it clear she doesn’t want or need help.”

“They all say they don’t want it. But why would she bring that up?” Grant asked.

“She was complaining about being with her family.” At least he thought it was complaining. “I said we might have to do something about that and she said she was good the way she was.”

“Nope,” Grant said. “She’s not. Neither is Royce. It’s time to move on to plan B. Next week, don’t you think?”

“I think you’re right. I’ll touch base with Richard and we’ll get our ducks all in a row and get ready to release them in the water.”

He was rubbing his hands together. Two at once was going to get complicated, but it was fun too!

DAMN TARGET LIST

Chloe was thrilled to be getting out of the office the following week and checking out the project that she'd been doing the plans for.

She'd been wanting to see how they looked, but work had been crazy busy. Normally she saw it slowing down at the end of November and into the holidays and Christmas, but it was more that everyone waited to the last minute and wanted what they wanted before they took their vacations.

"Thank you for bringing me here," she said to Grant. She was riding with them, sitting in the back seat. It was midmorning and she knew they wouldn't be long, but it was nice to see all her work in action.

"We should have done it sooner," Garrett said. "I guess we lose track of things since we are used to coming here to see the progress ourselves."

"How much of the building is actually occupied now?" she asked. She'd done the plans for three tenants, but she knew there were others on the project besides her.

"Only four right now," Grant said. "Two on the first floor and two on the second. The fourth floor is where we are going for this. It's the largest space for one tenant alone."

“It’s been a lot of work but tons of fun,” she said when they pulled into the building. It was massive. Five floors, fifty thousand square feet. Each floor was about ten thousand square feet. The fact that one business was taking up an entire floor shouldn’t have been shocking with the number of employees they had.

“The fourth floor is giving Royce fits,” Garrett said. “A tech company that is all about being more relaxed than businesslike. They want open spaces to put cubicles up themselves or massive workspaces. That is why a lot of the walls had to come down again.”

“I figured that is what they were doing,” she said. “There were a lot of open spaces and my guess was they are going to format it the way they want as their needs came and went.”

She’d only had ten closed-door offices in the ten thousand square feet. Multiple bathrooms that would be shared by most of the staff with the exception of a few. Like the one she just added for the two owners.

“It’s a different world than we are used to,” Grant said. “The noise might drive me nuts when I was trying to work, but this generation seems different.”

She laughed. “You mean me and your children’s generation? I can assure you most of us like our own space.”

At least she did. Maybe that was why she was still single. Or so her family kept telling her. She liked her time and space and not always sharing it with someone else when she didn’t want to.

“Yes,” Grant said. “We mean you and the kids. But I’m not sure one of our kids would like to work like this.”

“I wouldn’t,” she said.

They parked and she got out and they walked to the front door. The building looked cold on the outside. An old manufacturing building that was reinforced for strength but not warmth. Again, not her style, but she didn't have to look at it.

There was a lot of noise going on when they went in. "The tenants here so far don't seem to have too much of a problem with the noise, but they knew coming in that it was going to happen. I think once the fourth floor is done it will help."

"Those on the first floor probably don't hear that much and since there is no one on the third right now, it might be perfect timing."

"Which is why we decided to do it this way. Going two floors up from the closest tenants made it a little easier since the whole floor was getting worked on. And it looks like we've got possible tenants for the fifth floor too."

"Great," she said. The more work they gave her the better job security. Not that she had any worries, but this was exactly what she'd dreamed of for years and was glad that something in her life was falling into place.

They got in the elevator and went to the fourth floor. "No need for a hard hat," Grant said. "Right now they aren't doing any work above us. They are framing the offices and kitchen out with the bathrooms. Last I heard, the owners changed their mind on the flooring again."

She started to laugh. "I almost feel horrible joking about that with Royce."

She saw Grant and Garrett look at each other when she made that comment. She knew what they were doing.

Megan and Raina were right. She was next on their damn target list and she'd pieced it together that Royce was who they had lined up.

The only good thing she could say was she was interested in him, but she had to figure out how to take that step. Or at least figure out if he was.

For all she knew he was either clueless or didn't care one way or another. If that was the case, then the Fierce men were on their own and she'd look for some other guy to get her juices flowing. She wasn't going to be tied down to someone who wasn't interested.

"Royce is good at covering things well and getting it done when it needs to be," Garrett said.

She looked around the space and was thrilled to see it coming together. Since she drew the plans, she knew exactly what she was seeing. All the men working and moving around with supplies weren't distracting her at all.

What was throwing her off was the guy on a ladder reaching up over his head, his T-shirt lifted and some pretty sculpted abs peeking out.

Damn, guess there was another guy that could get her juices flowing.

She continued to watch him with his hat on backward, some nice strong shoulders and biceps. He had a tape measure in his hand and was marking something out on the ceiling over his head.

"I told you it was off center, Bob. Damn. Patch this up and remeasure. The last thing I need is for the tenants to come in and decide that they want another change. The more we get done the less they have the option to move."

That body she was trying to hide her drool from was Royce Kennedy and he was climbing down the ladder now and jumping off the last two.

He turned and caught sight of the three of them standing there watching the show.

“Good day to you, Royce,” Grant said.

“Gentlemen,” Royce said. “Chloe. I had no idea you were coming over.”

She smiled at Royce and his face turned slightly red. “Your father is meeting us,” Garrett said. “We are going to meet a client for the fifth floor in ten minutes. Chloe has done so much work on this building we thought we’d let her come along and check it out.”

She didn’t know they were meeting a client with Royce’s father. That information wasn’t shared. She wondered what she’d be doing while they met with the client. It’s not like she needed to be there when Grant was the lead engineer when it came to this building. Garrett dealt more with products than space. But since he was an owner in the building and the firm, it stood to reason he’d be here.

She knew if Grant or Garrett couldn’t make it, Drake normally stepped up with Ryder who was an architect. They were the next in line when it came to the buildings and did a lot of client visits on their own.

But this wasn’t a normal client either. This was another leg of their business.

“I didn’t know my father was going to be here today either,” he said. “He never said a word. But he doesn’t normally unless I need to be part of the meeting.”

“Richard called me at the end of the day yesterday. I’m sure he figured you’d be here anyway and he could pull you away. If not, it’s fine. It’s just a walk-through.”

“I can walk away for a bit,” he said.

“Wonderful,” Grant said. “Chloe, we wanted you to come up too as the engineer that would be doing the designs.”

“Of course,” she said.

This was huge for her to be part of a client meeting. She was both shocked and pleased and just hoped it wasn’t their way to try to bring her and Royce together. There was part of her that guessed it was, but she was going to take advantage of it on a professional front if she could.

“Sorry I’m late.”

She turned to see who she suspected was Richard Kennedy walking forward. He looked like an older version of his son, but she’d yet to meet him. She’d always dealt with Royce directly when doing work for Kennedy Construction.

She knew Richard didn’t work as much due to his health and Royce all but ran the operations now.

“I didn’t know you were coming, Dad,” Royce said.

“Sorry. It was a last minute thing and I didn’t want to bother you last night. I knew you’d be here anyway.”

“I am,” he said.

Grant pulled his phone out. “They are here. They just texted as I asked them to do and we’ll go down and get them if you want to meet us on the fifth floor. Chloe, why don’t you go up with Royce and Richard.”

“Sure,” she said. She turned. “We haven’t met formally yet.”

“Oh dear,” Garrett said, slapping his brother’s arm. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“I thought they did meet,” Grant said. “Chloe has been doing work for Kennedy’s since she’d been hired.”

“It’s fine,” she said. “We’ve talked but never met in person. I normally only deal with Royce.”

“It’s nice to put a face with a name,” Richard said. Richard turned to the Fierce brothers. “You two have the touch when it comes to putting people in the right roles.”

She held back her snort on that comment.

Son of a bitch. It seemed Richard might be in on this too, but she’d reserve judgment for another time.

Royce was frowning over the comment so he didn’t seem to know what was going on.

“Why don’t we go upstairs,” Royce said.

“It looks great here,” she said. “I can see it in my mind coming together. How many things have changed with their finishings?”

“More than I care to count,” he said. “I’m sure you heard me telling one of my men to fix that light. I don’t want any excuses to have to go back and redo or fix anything. This space should be ready by February first.”

“Wow,” she said. “That is fast.”

It was only about eight weeks away or so. Plus the holiday in there. There was a ton of work to be done yet.

“Not as fast as I would like. We can get it done faster, but I pushed the timeline out since they can’t make up their mind. And if we’ve got someone else coming on the floor above them, it might work out to get the work done the same time to prevent as much noise as possible.”

“Which is what we are hoping for,” Richard said.

They got in the elevator and she was next to Royce and tried not to inhale the earthy scent of him mixed in with the sawdust. She was pretty sure if they were animals, he might be able to smell she was in heat because her body was on fire.

On the fifth floor, she looked at the wide-open space. The elevators were in the front and back of the building, placed in the middle. There was also a set on each end in the middle width wise. Lots of ways to get to the floors, as they would be broken up around the elevators with hallways to enter all the spaces.

“It’s different when it’s open like this, isn’t it?” she asked Royce. “All these possibilities. That is what I see.”

“You two have that in common,” Richard said. “Royce loves open spaces. Even as a kid I’d put you in an open room and he was ready to start building.”

She grinned at the look on his face. “You didn’t want to go into engineering?”

“No,” he said. “I’m better with my hands. I want to put the work in and say I did that. Not just put it on paper.”

“I can see both sides. I’m not very good with my hands. I mean not with tools,” she said. “I’m good with them for other things though.”

Royce smirked at her and she started to blush and realized that came out the wrong way. Thankfully Richard had stayed

by the elevators, but she and Royce had started to walk away.

“It’s nice to be multi-talented,” he said.

She turned to look at him. “You’ve got sawdust on your jeans.”

He looked down at the sawdust on his thigh and wiped it off. “Hazard of the job. You’ve got some in your hair now though.”

“What?” she asked, lifting her hand up.

“Let me get it,” he said. “Things get stirred up in the air during the work.”

She stood there as his hand went to the ends of her hair on her back, pulling off what he saw. His knuckles brushed against her and it felt as if a match had burned right through her sweater, the spot was on fire so much and it took everything she had to not gasp.

HAS ITS MOMENTS

Jesus, Royce thought. What was wrong with him?

He could have just let it go that Chloe had sawdust in her hair, but he'd want to know if he was talking to a client and had that on him.

To him, it was like having food in his teeth and no one cluing him in on it.

But of course she couldn't find it and he had to remove it for her and then he touched her body and it felt as if the sweater she was wearing was soft as a cloud.

"Thanks," she said.

"Not a problem," he said. "I didn't know you'd never met my father. I would have introduced you."

"It's fine. I like watching Grant and Garrett blame the other for their faux pas."

"It's got to be interesting working with them all the time," he said.

"It has its moments," she said. "They are great employers though."

"They are great people," he said. "I've seen the two of them go at it. Nothing like Elise and I."

“Your sister?” she asked. “I’ve never met her but have heard of her.”

“Most have. She’s pretty vocal.”

“Unlike you?” she asked.

“I’m vocal,” he said. “When I want to be.”

He turned his head when the elevator dinged again and was thrilled for the reprieve. It was hard to be vocal when he was trying to roll his tongue back into his mouth.

Not only was he shocked that Chloe was here, but she was wearing jeans that fit her body too damn well with a pretty sweater. She had boots on her feet. Not high heel ones but ones that went well with her jeans with a smaller square sole.

She knew she was coming here today and probably didn’t want to be in pumps and nice clothes were his guess, but she still looked mouthwatering to him.

“Let’s go meet the new clients,” he said. “Should be interesting.”

“This is my first time. I’ll just be listening. I’m excited to be included.”

He had no clue she’d never been on a client meet before. He’d always talked with her, but that was different than when services were trying to be sold.

“Since this is all news to me I’m not sure how far into the process they are.”

It wasn’t like his father to not clue him in on things so he was guessing this wasn’t anything set in stone and maybe just a quick walk-through.

But thirty minutes later he realized that it was a done deal.

The clients knew what they wanted, how much space and what they wanted it to look like.

They even had pictures on a laptop they were showing to him and Chloe. She had her phone out and was typing in notes. He was jotting things on paper. He was old school that way.

Chloe hadn't said much, just took notes but was told she'd be the lead on the blueprints with Grant approving it all. For him, it seemed pretty basic and no frills. They could hammer this out fast and that was the name of the game.

Once the blueprints were drawn up though.

"You can email me those pictures if you want," Chloe said. "I made notes and dimensions, but I like to have references too." She handed over her business card.

He had some cards attached to his pad. "Here is my information too if you want to send it to me once everything is decided."

"We know what we want," Tony Waters said. "Once you get us the costs we'll set up an appointment with Olson's to get to work on the contract."

"Wow," Chloe said. "I can get to work on this tomorrow with what I've got on our end."

"Wonderful," Grant said. "Didn't I tell you she was a gem?"

"She is," Tony said. His eyes were looking Chloe over and Royce was seeing red. The guy was probably in his forties and had a wedding band on, but that didn't mean shit.

"If you aren't too busy this afternoon," his father said, "Royce, why don't you and Chloe get some lunch and talk

things over so she can get started? Then go back and meet with Elise on what you need. We'll get some prices together in the next few days and get moving on this."

He had too much shit to do to take time for lunch and wanted to say no. That he'd work on this tonight when he was home.

But his father was giving him the look that said don't argue and this client has to feel as if he's important enough to close this deal.

"Sure," he said. "Maybe Chloe has things to do though."

"Anything Chloe is working on can be pushed off for a few hours," Grant said. "We'll get this in place as fast as we can."

"I'm good if you've got the time, Royce. Though I rode here with Grant and Garrett."

"Royce can bring you back to the office," Richard said. "It's not that far from our place."

It was fifteen minutes out of the way, but he wasn't going to argue. He'd just find some place to eat close to her office.

"Now that that is settled," Garrett said, "we'll see you back at the office, Chloe."

"Guess you will," she said, smiling.

The Fierce brothers left with his father and the clients and he remained standing there with Chloe.

He looked at his watch. "It's not even noon. Are you hungry?"

"I could eat," she said. "Wherever your truck takes us is fine with me."

“How do you know I drive a truck?”

She laughed and looked him over the way Tony had her.
“Good guess. You know, being a gem and all.”

This time he laughed with her.



“TOO MUCH?” Richard asked Grant and Garrett on the first floor in another unoccupied spot.

The three of them shook hands with Tony and then hid away so that his son couldn't see them when he left with Chloe.

“No way,” Grant said. “That was perfect.”

“If you say so,” Richard said. “I'm sure I'm going to get an earful from my son later on why I put him on the spot and didn't tell him we had this meeting.”

“You did call us yesterday though,” Grant argued.

“Only to verify the time. We knew about this days ago. It's been hard to not mention it to my kids. They are both going to have my head for putting work on them last minute like this, but business is business and they know that.”

He'd play it off as being forgetful and hopefully could get away with it.

“What do you think of her?” Garrett asked. “She's a gem, right?”

“I can't believe you guys said that,” he said. He knew these brothers could be ballsy, but damn, he wasn't expecting to have it be right out like that.

“What?” Grant asked. “You asked for our help and we’re getting desperate. They’ve been working together for years.”

“I know,” he said. “And my son hasn’t made a move once. It makes me wonder why you think they’d be good for each other.

“She knows what she is talking about on a professional level,” Grant said. “She holds no punches back. She’s not clingy by any means.”

“How do you know these things?” he asked.

“She’s friends with Ryder’s sister-in-law. I hear things.”

“Grant snoops,” Garrett said. “But everything he said is true. She is calm and in control. She likes her space and privacy. She isn’t going to be someone that has to have a guy with her all the time and you said that has always been an issue with Royce.”

“True,” he said. His son never put his personal life first. Too bad he took after his old man and Richard hoped he could get his son to see that wasn’t the way to live his life. He’d be alone a long time if he kept it up.

“We are putting them together again. Let’s see if it gets us anywhere,” Garrett said.

“How will we know?” he asked.

“That is the tricky part. Now we have to start to sit back and see what happens. They will be working together on another project. If we have to push again we will. With the holidays coming up, we’ve got parties and events lined up. We can get them there together too. They are both single and probably have no plans.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” he said. “Keep me in the loop and I’ll try to do what I can on my end and hope to God Royce doesn’t find out.”

“We won’t let on,” Grant said.

“Please,” Garrett said. “You always slip and say something.”

“Me? You do it just as much,” Grant said.

Richard left the two brothers bickering and went back to the fourth floor to check on the work since he sent his son off to lunch.

GO FOR IT

“I know you’re busy,” Chloe said when they pulled into a pub parking lot. “We can make this fast.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “I don’t often get a lunch hour. Half the time I’m sitting here eating a sandwich and working or eating and talking to the guys.”

“That’s too bad,” she said. “I do eat at my desk a lot, but there are a few of us at the office that get together when we can. It’s nice to break away and have a few laughs and get out of the work mode even if it’s for thirty minutes.”

She had to admit she did enjoy the time with Raina and Megan when they weren’t talking nonstop about their relationships.

She’d never been much of a jealous person but found lately she was.

More so now that she knew exactly what Grant and Garrett were doing and with whom.

She had to decide if she was going to take a page from Megan’s book and tackle this head-on.

To her that meant letting Royce know and getting his read on it.

Yep, might as well go for it. It'd be better than the slow dance they were doing. A sloth could mate faster than her.

She almost laughed at that comment. Guess she was craving sex more than she thought and sitting next to Royce in his truck wasn't helping matters any.

"I've got way too much to do most times," he said. "It doesn't work that way for me."

He seemed grouchy now and she figured it was a mistake, but maybe not. If she put it out there and he was turned off by it, then she could move on easier.

"Table for two?" the hostess said.

"Yes," he said.

"Follow me."

They walked with the hostess to a booth and slid in on each side. This way they couldn't avoid the other's gaze while they talked.

"What do you think of this new project?" she asked. "Seems pretty cut and dry with no frills."

"That is what I saw. Elise will work up the costs and I'll go sit with her after I drop you off." His phone went off and he pulled it out, read it and put it away. "That was my father saying he stayed at the site and is overseeing things. That takes the pressure off of me about feeling behind."

She smiled. "I know that feeling. I heard your father had a heart attack a few years ago and doesn't work as much. Or he does more of the client meets?"

"He does," he said. "It's fine with me. I never minded them and have to sit in most time toward the end so they know who to call with issues when I schedule the guys there. Elise

schedules the projects based on when they come in, the amount of time I tell her it takes and the supplies needed, but the work all falls on me.”

“Sounds exciting on one hand and annoying on the other.”

He looked up from his menu and laughed at her. “That’s a good description. What about you? What made you want to do this line of work? I’m not one for sitting around and it feels to me that is all you do.”

She tried not to get annoyed he’d said that. She knew it was more that he might lack some social skills around women. Then she had to remind herself this wasn’t a date and was a work lunch.

“I was always good in math and science. Your father said you could go into a room and figure out what you wanted and start to build. I was the same way but saw it on paper and liked to design.”

“You didn’t want to be an interior designer? I thought most women did.”

She laughed. “You’re good at making assumptions, aren’t you?”

He looked up sharply and his face flushed just as rapidly. “Sorry. That was wrong. As you can tell, I don’t talk to women much.”

“As I see,” she said. “No harm. I say it like I see it if I’m around someone who I think can handle the truth.”

He held her stare. “I always want to know the truth. It’s easier to handle than being stabbed in the back and trying to pull the blade out and stem the flow of blood at the same time.”

Okay then, that gave her some insight, but she'd store it away.

“Design of paint colors and trends isn't anything I was interested in. This has more to do with building but in a different form. I know when I see possibilities and like to tackle them head-on.”

She was grinning at him as she said it and more heat filled his face. This was getting funnier than she thought it would. It was a different kind of dance that she was missing just as much as the sex.

“The same,” he said.

The waitress came over and took their drink orders. “Are you ready to order lunch too?”

“I'll take the turkey club with house chips,” she said.

“A bacon burger and fries,” he said, handing his menu over. “Back to work.”

“As I said, this will be pretty straightforward. I'll get to work on it tomorrow. Three thousand square feet, fifteen offices with a few on one side and most on the other, then open workspace and conference rooms. I took my notes. Tony seems pretty open to anything.”

“More than he was saying too,” he said.

“You noticed his gaze on my body too?” she asked. “That's the frustrating part for me. I want to be looked at as a professional and not a woman.”

“It's hard not to see you as a woman,” he said and she could see he wished he could have taken those words back.

Nope, she was glad he'd said them. “Men don't get it and that is fine. I don't hide who I am. I can handle myself just

fine. He is of no interest to me other than a client. Besides, he had a ring on his finger and that is a big fat get the hell out of my face.”

Royce snorted. “Not all women feel that way.”

“I know that,” she said. “But no one I spend my time with is like that.”

He nodded his head. “I shouldn’t make assumptions, as you said, but it’s not always easy.”

Which told her even more. She knew Royce was single, but maybe he’d been married before. Or had a girlfriend that cheated. It’s not like she was going to ask right now and she wouldn’t ask anyone else either.

They talked some more about work and then their food was brought out and they both started to eat.

It was now or never in her mind to broach the other thing on her mind.

“So,” she said, wiping her mouth with her napkin. “You do know what Grant and Garrett are doing, don’t you?”

He looked up and frowned and she only found it sexier. The confused look on his face, his dark eyebrows coming together. The lines around his mouth that she found very kissable.

So far this conversation hadn’t shut the valve off of the juices flowing in her body. And the idea that just popped in her head almost had her squirming in her seat.

“Filling their building full of clients?” he asked.

She let out a low laugh. “No. Well, yes. Let me rewind. You know they set all their kids up with their spouses, correct?”

Or at least boast they had a hand in finding them and nudging it all along.”

“I’ve heard that before but don’t pay much attention to it. I only know Drake and Ryder personally. I’ve met Jade but haven’t worked with her.”

“It’s true. They’ve moved onto friends of their kids, and well, now it’s coworkers. It’s like this game to them to see if they can find perfect matches.”

“Must be nice to have that much free time to think about those things,” he said, eating his burger.

Yeah, he was pretty thick and she was wondering if she grabbed the hammer in his truck and smacked him over the head with it if he’d figure out where she was going with this.

“That could be part of it,” she said, “but I think it’s more they want to see those they care for find some happiness.”

At least that was what she was trying to tell herself and she was honored it felt as if she fell into that group. It’d taken her time to realize it and she still wasn’t sure how much she wanted to be put in that class though.

Her own parents never tried to set her up with anyone. They only asked her all the time if she was going to be single forever.

Or they lectured her that she’d never find anyone if she didn’t compromise much in life. That it couldn’t be all about what she wanted and liked in life.

She wasn’t sure why not. She didn’t need a man to make her feel good about herself. Probably because she’d spent too much time trying to find that and was flopping faster than the chubby kid doing a belly flop into the shallow end of a pool.

“I feel for those people that get suckered into it,” he said.

This time she frowned. “I’m not sure anyone feels suckered into it. Most times they know what is going on and decide to play with Grant and Garrett.”

“Now that sounds fun though I don’t know that I would do that to my boss.”

She laughed. “You’d be surprised what good sports they are about things.”

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked, finishing off his burger and starting to pick at his fries.

The ketchup from one fell and hit his shirt and she started to laugh. He looked down and grabbed a napkin to wipe at it and it only made it worse. “Guess you were right about not wearing white. At least it’s dark and not that noticeable.”

“And I’m only going back to the office. Thankfully.”

“You asked why I was telling you all this about Grant and Garrett. It’s because they’ve decided I’m their next target. And yes, they use that word. The funny thing is, I started to realize who the guy was they are picking for me.”

“Who?” he asked.

She laughed. “Considering what your father did today. I’m going to say you are pretty slow even with the knowledge in front of you.”

“What?” he asked, the fry in his hand stopping and more ketchup falling. “Shit.” He grabbed the napkin again and wiped it up and threw the fry down. “You’re joking, right?”

“Geez, don’t sound so offended. I didn’t think I was that much of a troll. You did mention earlier that you said it’s hard to not notice I’m a woman.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you. It’s just there is no way my father is in on anything like this.”

“Are you so sure about that? The Fierces are pretty sneaky and today was just another example of many I’ve started to notice.”

PLEASING TO LOOK AT

Royce sat there feeling like a fool on more than one level.

Good lord, he was eating like a slob dropping food everywhere, but it was hard when he was sitting across from Chloe.

Her laughter. Her smile. Even her smirk was sending more beats to his heart than ever before.

He tried to keep it professional and yet still put his foot in his mouth more than he should have.

But the bombshell she just dropped on him almost had his ass lifting off the bench and running for the door to track his father down and demand to know what the fuck was going on.

No way his dad would do this.

Yet he was sitting there thinking of it and it was starting to make sense and only pissed him off.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I can’t imagine why my father would want to set me up with someone. He doesn’t even know you.”

“But he knows the Fierces and what they do. I’m surprised you didn’t.”

She had a point there. His father had brought it up a few times in the past few months. He shrugged it off as he had no care about others' personal lives. Not when his was so dismal.

"I've got too many other things to worry about in my life than that," he said.

"I can see that," she said. "And just so you know, it's taken me a long time to realize what was going on myself. A few of my coworkers who are happily married or in relationships thanks to the Fierces pointed it out. Once they did I saw I was the next one on their list. In the past week I realized who they were focusing on. Today just dropped my feet into the concrete though when I realized you were here and had no idea I was coming or what was going on. It's not like Grant and Garrett to surprise their employees like they did unless there was an agenda."

"The same with my father," he said. "I'm sure he's going to play it off as if it slipped his mind, but he's as sharp as a tack."

He was going to have to play this close to his chest to get information.

"I wanted you to know that I'm not falling for it. That is why I clued you in on it."

"Thanks," he said.

He wasn't sure how he felt about that. Guess she wasn't that interested in him. And he didn't know why he was annoyed over that either because, as he kept saying, he had no time for anything or anyone.

"But," she said, "I do find you pleasing to look at."

She was laughing at him. "The same."

She fluttered her eyes at him and did a little head wiggle and he laughed. "I've got a proposition for you myself."

"I'm listening," he said.

"Like you, I don't really have a lot of time for a man."

"I didn't think you were that busy by the sounds of it," he said.

"I'm busy but not like you. I'll rephrase that. I don't have the patience for the whole dating thing. I've tried it for years. It never works. Or maybe, as my mother says, I can't give in and compromise enough. I don't know. I just like what I like and want what I want. I don't think that is a bad thing and I'm not controlling or mean with it."

"It's not a bad trait to have," he said. "We just all have to live with our choices."

"And I have and don't have an issue with it."

"Then what is the problem?"

"No problem," she said. "A proposition."

"That's right. What's the proposition?"

His throat had gone dry so he picked up his soda and finished it off. His food wasn't being touched again. No reason to drop more of it on his clothing.

He wasn't even sure how she could say he was so pleasing to the eye when it seemed like he hadn't done or said anything positive to her.

She probably thought he was some idiot that was a slob on top of it.

"That we skip the hoopla and song and dance of dating and just get to what happens after the third or fourth time after we

go to dinner?”

For someone that was so straightforward, she wasn't saying the words. He wasn't going to be left assuming or guessing.

“Hmmm, I just said I make a lot of assumptions and they tend to bite me in the ass. You might need to be clearer.”

“Sex,” she said quietly. “I don't need pretty things and lots of time where you have to feel me out. I'm attracted to you. Very attracted. We've had a working relationship for years. I know you're an upstanding citizen and single. You have to have some good traits or the Fierces wouldn't have picked you.”

He laughed this time. “I don't picture you as a friends with benefits type of person.”

“I've never been that way before. This is going to be new territory for me. I think we might need some ground rules if you're open to it. I figured, hey, we are both single. You don't have a lot of time and I'm not going to demand or require it from you. Sounds like a win to me.”

He'd be stupid to say no, but this was all sounding like a setup or dream too.

“It could be a win,” he said.

“But you want to think about it,” she said. “Which is exactly why we are having this conversation. I wasn't asking we start now on the way back to work.”

“There is a hotel not that far from here,” he said, seeing what her reaction would be.

She blushed and it only turned him on more. “There is. Maybe another time. This is just a conversation. You're busy

and we need those ground rules of sorts.”

“Which could be considered a date to get them,” he said.

“Nope,” she said. “Verbal contract negotiations.”

He grinned at her. “I like that.”

The waitress returned. “Can I get you guys anything else?”

“I’m good,” Chloe said.

“Just the bill,” he said. He needed to get her back to work and think on this himself. He also had to find out if what Chloe said was true and if his father was in on this and how he’d get that out of him.

“You’ve got time to process this,” she said. “Come up with any rules you want. We can lay it out and go from there. If you don’t think it’s a good idea, that’s fine. Then you just know the Fierces have you on their radar and you’ll be hearing my name a lot.”

“I think I can handle them,” he said. “But speaking of them...if we do agree to this, who is going to know?”

“No one,” she said. “That will be part of one of my rules. I’m not telling any friends or coworkers. Especially not my bosses. I don’t need to be looked at like that. As I said, this is uncharted territory for me, but I’m open to it.”

“Why are you open to it?” he asked. He should know that going in. “Besides what you already said. Or is it as simple as that?”

“Nothing like that is ever simple. I don’t think it is for you either. But the simple truth is I haven’t had sex in a long time. I don’t make a habit of sleeping with guys I go on a few dates with. So though I’ve dated in the past few years, it hasn’t gone very far.”

“I’m a tool for you?” he asked.

She started to laugh so hard she had tears in her eyes and he was beginning to wonder if he was more entertainment for her than anything.

“You could be one,” she said. “But that isn’t what I was thinking. Listen, Royce. If this isn’t something you feel comfortable with, just tell me. It won’t hurt my feelings. I’ll have no problem telling my bosses that you aren’t interested in me and that we know what they are doing. It might be a first for them, but they can’t win them all.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t interested,” he said quickly.

He paid the bill and she stood up, so he did the same. “Good. Then think it over. You’ve got my cell phone number. Let me know. The holidays are coming up and I know you’re busy. No pressure.”

“I’ll think about it,” he said. He was surprised she was going to be...nonchalant about this for someone who said they’d never done it before.

Which of course made him wonder if that was the truth or not, but he told himself to let it go and not be so cynical. She’d had no reason to lie to him and he’d never felt she was that type of a person in all the time they’d worked together.

He dropped her off at her office and then went to drive back to his office thinking more of what just transpired.

He’d be crazy to say no to her proposition. He wasn’t even going to be upset that maybe that was all she saw or thought of in terms of him.

It’s not like he gave any indication of wanting to go on a date. She’d said she was attracted to him and he was of her, but yet he’d never made the move.

Neither did she though and she seemed pretty outspoken. She had to be to say what she did at lunch.

Jesus, just more shit to think about on top of work.

He was walking back to his office and decided to go see what his father was actually thinking.

“Hey,” he said. “I’ve got a bunch of things to talk to Elise about. Did you fill her in?”

“I did,” his father said. “How was lunch with Chloe?”

He frowned. He had to play this up as if it was only a work lunch and not what they’d talked about toward the end. “Fine,” he said. “We got a lot done, which is why I’ll meet with Elise now and she can get some prices together.”

“Chloe seems like such a smart woman. Grant and Garrett couldn’t say enough about her when we started this project, but then again, she’s been working with you for years. You get along well, right?”

This was nothing more than what his father had been saying for months, but now that he had the knowledge that Chloe shared he was starting to wonder if he was some pawn in a game.

No, pawn wasn’t a good word.

But he did remember Chloe saying the Fierces were sneaky and now he wondered if him having to stand around waiting for blueprints the other day because Grant misplaced them was part of it.

It’s not like Chloe was in on it. He could tell she was just as flustered as he was over the whole thing.

Damn it all.

“Yeah, we do. Why?”

He was going to see what he could get out of his father, but he wouldn't let on. There was part of him that knew he was going to say yes to Chloe's proposition just because he'd love nothing more than to get her naked body under his.

To spend time with her too and not have to worry about impressing her. Making her feel like she was at the top of his priority list when he didn't even put himself there.

He'd seen what that did to a marriage and wasn't going to get himself into a mix-up like his parents.

But she was giving him an out that he'd never tried before. It might not hurt to see how it worked out for now.

“Just checking,” his father said. “And lunch went well?”

“Yes,” he said. “I thought I told you that. Are you feeling okay? You didn't tell me about this meeting today and now you keep asking the same questions. When is your next doctor's appointment? Maybe there is something more going on.”

He held back his grin saying that, knowing his father would be annoyed. “I'm feeling great,” his father said. “But I did forget to tell you about the meeting. Well, not really. It just happened so fast and then it slipped my mind and I knew you'd be there. I stayed on and finished up for you so you didn't get behind.”

“You did, but you aren't still there and I'd be there,” he pointed out. Might as well play with his father a little since he was being blindsided and thrown into some matchmaking game he didn't even know existed.

“I knew you'd be back here and I had to come and talk to Elise too,” his father said. “But I can go back if you want.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “I’ll meet with her and I talked to the foreman there before I returned. It’s all good.”

“Because we’ve got good men working for us,” his father said. “And good women too. I can’t forget to say that or your sister would throw a fit.”

“Chloe might too,” he said just to see his father’s reaction. Yep, his father was in on this based on that smirk.

Son of a bitch.

THE NEXT STEP

Chloe just watched Megan and Jonah leave Diane Fierce's house during the Christmas Eve party. She'd never been invited to this before and was positive the only reason she was this year was because she was their target.

She'd been here over an hour and moved around talking to many. She was thinking it was time to leave when she saw Royce enter.

Maybe not now.

The two of them had been working together for the past three weeks on Tony Water's office space but not talking about anything else other than that.

If she was frustrated that she put so much of herself out there, she kept it sealed tight. No way she was sharing her embarrassment with anyone else.

He'd said he was interested but obviously not as much as he let on.

Grant and Garrett had been dropping hints more than ever before, but she really had nothing to contribute and changed the subject every time.

"Chloe," Royce said, making his way over to her. She'd just gone to get some more snacks and hoped to make her way

back to him.

He'd made the first move and there was part of her that thought he'd done it so he wasn't standing there alone.

"Royce," she said.

They stood there with an awkward silence that neither of them wanted to have. She knew. She saw it on his face.

"About a few weeks ago," he said.

"Yes?" she said.

"Work is crazy busy and there has been some family drama I've been sucked into. It's nothing more than that."

She wasn't going to ask him to elaborate. "You don't need to explain anything," she said. "You said you were going to think about it and maybe you need more time than most."

He laughed. "I don't need that much time. I know what I want."

She looked around and didn't notice that many eyes on her. "What is it you want?"

"I think you know," he said, taking a sip of his beer.

"And it's not the time to get into it," she said. But her heart was racing again and she was thrilled that this might be going forward.

"No," he said. "Though maybe we could play with everyone else here if you want?"

She grinned. She didn't expect him to be that way. "You figured out your father is an active part of this project?"

She was keeping their talk toward business.

“Yes,” he said. “I like the way you think, judging from our last conversation.”

“Then you know how to reach me,” she said. “When you’re ready for the next step.”

“I do,” he said, looking around the room some more. She followed his gaze and saw Grant waving to him. “Guess it’s time I go mingle.”

“Me too,” she said. “I’ll probably leave soon. I was going to until you showed up.” She wasn’t sure why she admitted that much but felt since he gave a little she could do the same.

“Good to know. Have a nice holiday,” he said.

She moved away while he went toward Grant.

She didn’t even get one step before Diane Fierce appeared next to her as if she teleported from another part of the house.

“Chloe,” Diane said. “I’m so glad you could make it here today. I’m sorry I haven’t had a chance to come talk to you, but I did see you talking to Grant and Garrett earlier.”

“No worries,” she said. “I know you’re busy being a host.” She leaned in closer. “We know the women are the ones that do all the work for these things.”

Diane put her hand on her arm. “Don’t you know it. Thankfully I’ve got Payton’s deli to supply a lot of it now and Carolyn and I don’t have to cook as much.”

“You love it though,” she said.

“I do. There is nothing better than welcoming people into your house and life. As you can tell more and more are invited every year.”

She followed Diane's eyes to Royce talking to Grant. They were obviously all in on this though it was the first time that she'd talked to Diane about it.

"And I appreciate the invitation," she said. "Oh, it looks as if someone is waving you over by the table."

"Dang it," Diane said. "I better go see what is missing that they need me for."

She started to laugh as Diane moved away, but heard another voice say, "Don't let them get into your head."

She turned to see Jade Fierce James standing there. "I'm good at not letting anyone in there that doesn't follow my rules."

Jade grinned. "I like you. You're playing with them, aren't you?"

Chloe took a drink of her soda. "Not sure what you're talking about."

Jade held her glass up to her. "Good on you. It's so much fun to watch from the sidelines now."

"I'm sure it is now that the bright lights aren't on you anymore."

Jade laughed and moved away. She finished her soda and decided it was time to call it a night. No reason to stay and since Royce just got here, they'd notice she left right after and might be frustrated.

She turned and saw Royce standing there talking to Grant, then almost feel her eyes on him and glance away. She wanted to smile at him, but he turned quickly and left after she winked. He probably didn't see it and she hoped no one else did either.

“Chloe,” Carolyn Fierce said when she was looking for her jacket. “I’m so glad you could come. You haven’t been here long though. Do you need to be somewhere?”

She tried not to laugh over the attempt to keep her now that Royce was here. She knew what was going on. It wasn’t only the men that were sly and sneaky.

“It’s been a long day,” she said. “I’ve got an early one tomorrow with family too. I had a great time though.”

“We do enjoy having these get-togethers and understand people have a lot going on and can stop in and mingle as long as they’d like.”

“I’ve been here over two hours. Longer than I thought I would but had a great time.”

“Then I’m glad,” Carolyn said. “Have a lovely Christmas tomorrow.”

“I will. I’m spending it with my family.”

“Oh,” Carolyn said. “No one else?”

“Not anyone else to spend it with,” she said, grinning.

“You know, we could help you with that,” Carolyn said, lifting her eyebrows.

She’d give Carolyn credit for putting it out there. “As I’ve said to Grant and Garrett before, I’m good. Thanks. Merry Christmas to you and the family.”

She left and started to laugh when she got to her car. Hopefully Royce would do his part too.



“ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL PARTY,” Diane said later that night when everyone had left and it was just she and her husband, her sister-in-law and brother-in-law. “More and more people each year and it’s like I can’t keep track of who came in and who left.”

“You love every minute of it,” Grant said. “You know you do.”

“I do,” she said. “Jonah and Megan look happy. You guys are doing a good job there. But you’re failing with Chloe.”

Grant sighed. “We’re trying. She doesn’t seem interested. Or maybe Royce isn’t. I tried with him too and got nothing.”

“I saw them talking together,” Carolyn said. “Just for a few minutes.”

“So did I,” Grant said. “Well, it was more they were standing together and not talking. It was probably more that Royce didn’t want to stand alone. I saw him seek Chloe out and then he moved to me quickly.”

“And I swooped in on her,” Diane said. “We are good at tag teaming this, but I got nothing out of her.”

“I tried,” Carolyn said. “I saw her leaving after you talked to her. She didn’t stay long after Royce arrived. I tried to get her to stay longer by asking if she had plans, but she said she had a long day ahead of her with family tomorrow.”

“Did you ask if it was only family?” Garrett asked.

“Of course I did,” Carolyn said. “I’m not new to this rodeo. She said it was. I even told her we could help her with that.”

“What was her response?” Grant asked.

“That she was good. Just like she told you two. So that is my point; you need to work harder on her.”

She watched as her husband and brother-in-law looked at each other and sighed. “We’re trying. I’m not sure what more we can do. Even Richard is trying and not getting anywhere,” Grant said.

“I talked to Richard the other day and he said Royce has been running around like crazy the past two weeks and then he alluded to his ex causing some drama in the family with the holidays too.”

“Becky always had a lot of drama surrounding her,” Grant said.

“I wonder if that has affected Royce at all,” Diane said.

“No clue,” Garrett said. “Men don’t talk about those things.”

“Maybe you should,” Carolyn said. “Then you’d have a better chance at this match. You two told us you had it covered, but it doesn’t seem to be happening.”

“Well, if you two think you’ve got a better shot at it, then go for it next week at the New Year’s Eve party. If we can even get Royce there,” Grant said.

“You get him there and Carolyn and I will do our magic and show you two how it’s really done,” she said.

“Sure,” Grant said. “What do you think, Garrett? We going to let our wives show us up?”

“Good luck, ladies. This one might be our first failure.”

“It’s thinking like that that has this match not going anywhere,” she said. “Just remember that.”

OLIVE BRANCH

“So you made it.”

Royce bit his tongue when his mother made that comment the minute he and Elise walked in her door on Christmas morning.

“Merry Christmas to you too, Mom,” Elise said sarcastically. He’d told his sister if he had to go she was too. Neither one of them wanted to be here and leave their father alone, but in the end they figured if they did this now they’d have a reprieve for a solid year or more.

They were staying for brunch and then going back to have dinner with their father.

Becky Vern rolled her eyes at her daughter. “You always were snotty,” his mother said.

“Must get it from you,” Elise said though she did force a smile and move over to kiss her mother on the cheek. “Merry Christmas, Steve.”

“The same to you,” Steve said. “I was just going to make your mother a mimosa. Can I get each of you one?”

Elise giggled when she looked at Royce. “I’ll pass,” he said. No way he was going to be caught dead with that sissy drink. Give him a beer or wine if that was all they had.

Champagne if it was for a big occasion. He didn't mix juice with any alcohol. Straight up or nothing at all.

If it wasn't for the fact he was driving over an hour home and his mother wouldn't give him shit, he'd ask for a beer, regardless of it being just after ten in the morning.

"I'll take one," Elise said. "I need it."

His mother lifted her nose and walked into the kitchen with her husband of fifteen years. She wanted someone to wait on her and she got that.

This nice house that his mother put her own design touch on was nothing like his father's taste. Or his either. Not that he cared all that much. He didn't have to live here.

Hell, his father would have lived with it and he knew that, but his father wouldn't wait on his mother hand and foot at her every whim.

He worked too hard and too much so that his mother could buy everything she wanted and then she still bitched it wasn't enough.

When she grew tired of that, she used the excuse his father wasn't around.

Yep, his father wasn't. No disputing that. But when his parents were in the same room all they did was argue with his mother starting in the minute his father walked in the door.

He saw it and he remembered it all.

The man he looked up to was never good enough.

His father brought dirt in when he came home.

His father was out sweating and smelled at times.

His father never wore anything but jeans and work boots when he left the house. Of course he did. He worked construction. A suit and tie weren't exactly the dress code of choice.

Maybe Royce having all those memories in his head made it hard for him to let go enough to find someone. He figured deep down the same would happen to him.

Which of course was why Chloe's proposition sounded so damn good.

He wouldn't have any of those issues with Chloe because she knew going in. That was what these ground rules were going to be too.

"Don't get her going," he whispered to his sister. "I had to drag you here to begin with and you're just going to get her back up more and you get to drink the time away."

"It's two hours tops," Elise said. "There is no amount of drinking that will get me through this and you know it."

His sister had a point.

"Here is your drink," his mother said, coming out and handing it over to Elise. "I see you haven't changed your style much either."

His sister took a healthy sip of her mimosa. "What's wrong with wearing jeans and a sweater?" Elise asked. "We've been in the car almost ninety minutes and it's only brunch with the four of us. I didn't know there was a dress code here for this. Maybe your invitation should have specified."

There was no telling Elise to dial it back. His sister had her reasons for feeling the way she did toward their mother. Most of them were the same as his, but he supposed Elise got the worst of it.

For some reason his mother thought Elise would move with her when she left. His mother forgot Elise was Daddy's little girl and there was no way she was leaving his side.

If Elise was closer to her father it probably had more to do with the fact his mother threw dresses on Elise all the time when she said she didn't want them. Their father stood up for his daughter and said to let her be the person she wanted and don't shove her into a mold.

He'd never understood that as a kid, but as he got older Royce realized his mother tried to do that to his father.

"Becky," Steve said. "Can we have a relaxing day, please? This generation isn't like ours and you know it. No one dresses up for anything. I've told you time and again how many people wear jeans to the office now."

His mother waved her hand. "That is so unprofessional."

"The work is getting done," Steve said. "That is all I care about. Please, Royce and Elise, come be seated and catch us up on everything."

For as much as he hated visiting his mother he was at least thankful her second husband tried to keep the peace. He'd thought Steve was a wuss and controlled by his mother and by the looks going back and forth between them he was positive Steve would feel that wrath tonight, but it wasn't his problem.

"Not much to say," he said. "Work is busy."

"And that is all the two of you spend your time doing," his mother said. "At your ages you should be settled down, but you are never going to find someone if you don't make time for it."

"Work has nothing to do with finding someone," he said.

Elise turned and looked at him and smirked and he wasn't sure why. "Royce is right. He can't find anyone because if you're to be believed it's the job he does and the way he looks. I suppose the same could be said about me. No man wants a woman that doesn't host a party as well as you, right, Mom?"

"Elise," Royce said. He wasn't going to play the peacemaker today either, but he'd have to listen to this on the drive home too if he didn't put an end to it. "Work is the same it always is, Mom. You never cared much about it before so no reason to talk about it now. How are things with you?"

"Things are lovely as always," his mother said. "Steve and I are going to put an addition on the house."

"That's nice," he said. "I'm surprised you'd want to live in the construction."

"I don't want to and will have to find things to do while they are here during the day, but it's a means to an end," his mother said.

"Royce," Steve said. "Would you like to see the design?"

"Sure," he said, getting up and following Steve to his office. Elise wouldn't be thrilled she was left alone with their mother, but that wasn't his problem. His sister could handle herself.

Steve pulled out the blueprints and he looked at the primary suite and sunroom that would be added to the back of the house. "It's pretty big," Steve said. "Your mother has hated to climb the stairs to the bedroom for years and she finally wore me down to put our room on the first level."

It was probably more about the fact that Steve got sick of listening to the complaining daily. "I'm sure it's going to be

great when it's done. You'll get your money back if you ever sell."

"No," Steve said. "I won't leave. I'm staying here and this is the only way to assure it was done."

Which explained more of things. Steve owned this house when he met his mother. He'd lived here with his first wife and kids. Stepsiblings Royce had and didn't talk to. He was positive they were coming this afternoon and that was why he and Elise were asked to come this morning. His mother wasn't big on putting both families together.

"It will be a lot of unused space," he said.

"It will," Steve said. "I've got too many memories here to leave. Your mother understands that."

Steve's wife died of cancer three years prior to his mother meeting him. He also knew that Steve's kids weren't fond of his mother who probably came in and acted the same way as she did to her own kids.

If it worked in their marriage then so be it. It wasn't his life and he was far enough away to not worry.

"I'm glad she understands something," Royce said.

Steve laughed. "My kids will be here later today. She's nervous. You know how she is."

"Yeah," he said. "I do. She needs to get her moodiness out on her own kids so she can be a ray of sunshine for yours."

He hadn't meant to say that when Steve frowned, but then his stepfather nodded his head and that said just about everything.

"That had to be the longest two hours of my life," Elise said a few hours later when they were in his truck and driving

back to Durham.

“You’ve had worse with Mom and you know it,” he said. “And you got to drink. I just had to chug water with an aspirin to prepare to listen to this from you on the way back.”

Elise sighed. “Sorry. I know I’m dumping on you. I shouldn’t.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “Get it off your chest and then when we get to Dad’s we can chill out and stuff our faces and drink. I need it too. A beer is going to go down good.”

“Same here,” Elise said. “I’m not even a fan of champagne, but it was just having the alcohol to get through.”

“What did Mom say to you when I was looking at the plans with Steve? Your face was red when I returned.”

“Nothing more than the same,” Elise said. “She was trashing Dad. She never does that in front of you. Only me. She still resents that I fought to stay with him and not move with her. I didn’t want to leave you either. If I had to go with Mom, then you would’ve had to go with me and that wasn’t happening.”

“What?” he asked.

“You didn’t know?” Elise asked.

“Obviously not. What is going on?”

“Mom wanted me with her, not you. She said you were too much like Dad and you two belonged together. No way I was moving away on my own without you. She wanted to start her life over and didn’t want a kid anyway. It was only so she didn’t look bad that she wanted one of us.”

He knew that part. That it was always frowned on when the mother didn’t get the kids. Or at least didn’t get them part

time. What he didn't know was that his mother wanted them split up.

“Why am I only hearing this now?” he asked.

Nothing like making him feel like shit that he'd never be good enough even for his own mother.

Elise shrugged. “I thought you knew. I mean it's not like anyone actually told me. I heard it when Mom and Dad were fighting during the divorce.”

“Which means it was said in anger and not the truth,” he said.

“Do you think Mom ever said anything that wasn't the truth? Hell, her truth always came out in anger. If she said it calmly I'd think it was a lie.”

His sister had a point. “It doesn't matter now,” he said. “You were happier staying where you were. Dad would never let us be split up and you know it. I wouldn't have let it happen either.”

“Awww,” Elise said. “I know you love me and all.”

“Brat,” he said to her.

She laughed. “I love you too, Royce. You know that.”

“I do.”

“We are so damaged by her. That's why we are both still single. I wanted to say that so badly.”

“It would have only made it worse,” he said. “Steve told me the addition was because Mom has wanted it for years. He said it was the only way she would stay in the house and Steve said there were too many memories for him to leave.”

“His first wife sounded so nice and sweet. How the heck can he stand being with Mom?”

“Maybe she’s a different person with him because he gives her what she wants. We don’t know their lives on a daily basis. Mom cares for the house and helps him entertain. When Steve is around, he seems to dote on her. It’s what she always wanted.”

Royce couldn’t imagine being married to someone whose greatest accomplishment for the month was finding the right fabric for new curtains. He thought his ears were going to bleed listening to his mother talk about that for twenty minutes.

It was still better than being knocked down though.

“More power to her,” Elise said. “Did Steve say anything else when you were in his office?”

“Only that his kids were coming this afternoon which we figured. I slipped and said that explained her moodiness with us. She had to get it out so she could be on her best behavior around his kids.”

“Oh my God,” Elise said as she burst out laughing. “I wish I could have been in there to hear you say that. You never say anything like that. That would have been something I’d say. What was his reaction?”

“He frowned and then nodded his head and said nothing else.”

“Wuss,” Elise said. “He can’t even defend his own wife.”

“Why would he if he didn’t think it was right?” he asked.

“Because you stand up for the person you love,” Elise said. “Even if they are wrong, you talk about it in private, but you

put a united front up to others.”

His sister was right. People in love should do that.

Something his father did for his mother but his mother never did for his father.

“He didn’t say a word and maybe that was his way of offering an olive branch for the shit we had to deal with today. We’re good for a solid year now,” he said.

“I hope so. She made a big enough fuss for us to go there this year and then treated us exactly the way we both felt. You’d think she’d realize that is why we don’t visit or call.”

“Mom never thinks she does anything wrong. It’s beyond us now and we can enjoy the rest of the day with Dad.”

“Yeah,” Elise said. “Dad’s great. He’s always upfront and honest. He never knocks us down and he stands up for us all the time.”

“He does,” he said softly. He wasn’t ready to let his sister know that their father wasn’t always upfront and honest and had something up his sleeve.

He supposed in the grand scheme of things, trying to set his son up with a woman wasn’t a horrible idea, but to Royce, he was frustrated because he felt like Elise did, that their father had always been there for them and now he wasn’t so sure what to think.

TIMES ARE DIFFERENT

“How is work going?” Chloe’s mother asked her on Christmas morning.

“It’s good,” she said. “Busy as always, but I love it.”

“You need to find time to have a personal life,” her father said. “You aren’t getting any younger.”

She kept her smile in place when she wanted to growl. It was the holiday after all and her niece and nephew witnessed this. No reason to upset Tiffani and Tyler.

“Thank you for that, Dad. I almost forgot.”

Her brother Dane laughed and looked away. “What about you, Dane?” her mother asked. “How is your job going?”

Her brother was a pediatrician. He’d gotten married in med school, had his kids while he finished his residency and fellowships and then six months after he was officially practicing, his ex filed for divorce citing he was never there for her and the kids.

She’d been pissed for her brother. She’d been in his corner helping the whole time.

Her ex-sister-in-law, Melanie, was only in it for the potential of being married to a doctor. She'd always felt that way.

Melanie pushed for the kids when Dane was focused on his career, but Melanie insisted she could handle it.

Chloe had seen the writing on the wall but could only be there for Dane through it all.

He'd been divorced about a year now, almost. He had shared custody of the kids and when he was at work, her parents picked them up from daycare or school until Dane was done.

He was making it work the best he could with the hand he was dealt.

"Going great," Dane said. "I get to make babies cry all the time."

"You don't make me cry, Daddy," Tiffani said. At five years old she had her daddy wrapped around her little finger.

"I remember a few tears now and again. You don't like to get your shots either," Dane said.

"But you kiss it and make it better," Tyler said. "They only hurt for a minute. And I don't cry. I'm strong."

Chloe laughed and grabbed Tyler and threw him in the air. "Oh my God," she said. "How much spinach are you eating? You weigh a ton."

"Yuck," Tyler said. "Spinach is gross."

"Yes, it is," she said, putting him down. He ran to the toys he'd opened earlier. She knew Dane was going to have to leave in a few hours to bring the kids to Melanie's house.

“It seems as if work is all that my kids do,” her mother said.

“It’s how you pay the bills,” she said.

Her father rolled his eyes like he always did when she made that comment.

“You’re never going to find someone if you don’t make time for it. Look at your brother,” her mother said.

No way she was letting Dane get shit on today. “That wasn’t his fault,” she said. “Melanie knew what she was getting into.”

“Don’t defend me,” Dane said. “And I’d rather not talk about my children’s mother when they are in the other room. So drop it. All of you.”

“Agreed,” she said. “For both of us. I’m happy.”

“One of these days you’re going to have to compromise,” her mother said. “You know that, Chloe. Otherwise...”

“Is the roast burning?” she asked. “What is that smell?”

Her mother stood up and walked to the kitchen, her father following.

“That was smooth,” Dane said to her.

“They left, didn’t they?”

“For now,” Dane said. “So, are you really happy?”

She looked at her brother and wasn’t sure where this was coming from. “I’m not unhappy. Isn’t that good enough?”

Dane snorted. “I thought the same thing, so you tell me.”

She looked at her brother. They were nothing alike in looks and never would be. They didn’t even look like their parents

because they were adopted.

It wasn't a secret but not something she ever really broadcasted to people either.

Why? Her parents raised her from when she was two days old. Dane when he was three months old.

"Are we damaged? I mean really? There are times I think Mom and Dad think that and it's why they always ask us what is going on in life or want us to make time for other people."

"I don't think I'm damaged," Dane said. "I fell in love with the wrong person, but that doesn't make me damaged. I've got two wonderful children out of it."

She smiled. Her brother was always like that. He tried to find the best in things. She wasn't so sure she did, though she did like to make people laugh.

"You did. They are great kids and seem to be well adjusted. I just wonder if Mom and Dad think there is something wrong with us since we don't share the same genetics as them. They were married and trying to have kids in their early twenties."

"Times are different," he said. "Women are having kids later in life."

"And they don't even need to be married," she said.

He lifted one eyebrow at her. "Are you thinking of having a kid without a man? Oh good Lord, to be a fly on the wall when Mom finds that one out."

"I don't know what I'm doing," she said. "I'm not even thinking one way or another about kids. But in five or six years if I'm still single and my clock is ticking, then I think maybe I will do that. I'd like to have a child someday."

“You need to make those decisions when you’re ready,” Dane said. “Don’t let someone else talk you into or out of them.”

“Did that happen to you?” she asked.

He shrugged. He didn’t often talk about his marriage, but she knew kids weren’t in the immediate future for him when he was still doing his residency. It was hard for him to focus on both.

“I let my wife down,” he said. “I worried this would happen and it did. I’d worked too hard to not finish what I started with my career.”

“She knew going in the amount of schooling you had to do,” she said.

“She did. But she got stars in her eyes and then when Tiffani was born it was hard on us both. We weren’t sleeping much and I was trying to study. I told her I’d make it up to her, but I couldn’t throw it away either.”

She hated to hear him talk about this. “We were all there helping her,” Chloe argued. “Everyone knew what you were going through to get there. She was the one who wanted Tyler right after. I remember being shocked when she told me she wanted to start trying again.”

Dane let out a sigh. “It’s in the past. I love my kids. I wouldn’t change that.”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” she said. But she could tell Dane didn’t feel as if he had a say when Melanie was trying to get pregnant with Tyler. Melanie had told her that she’d stopped taking birth control and didn’t want the kids too far apart in age.

It wasn't her life and she wasn't going to get in the middle of it.

"Melanie is dating someone," Dane said.

"Oh," she said. "Is this the first time she has?"

"As far as I know. We have an agreement to let the other know before the kids meet them."

She'd give her brother credit because he was putting the kids first. She'd be bitter over the way the marriage ended, but to him he was more focused on co-parenting.

For as angry as she was with Melanie over leaving her brother when he'd fought so hard to keep their marriage together, her ex-sister-in-law did love her kids.

"If she is telling you then she wants the kids to meet him?" she asked. "How do you feel about that?"

"I don't know," he said. "We haven't gotten that far. I thought the same thing. She just told me two days ago when I picked the kids up as they went to get their stuff."

"You'd think she'd find a better way to tell you than rush it then," she said.

"That's how she is. She has to get it off her chest when she knows there is no time to talk. I'll touch base with her this week. I won't bring it up today."

Because her brother wouldn't want to ruin anyone's holiday, but his ex obviously didn't share that sentiment.

"We are almost ready for dinner," her mother said. "Chloe, if you want to set the table."

"Sure," she said. She turned to Dane when her mother left the room. "The sooner we eat the sooner we can get out of

here.”

“So, if I ask you if you’re happy again, what would your answer be?” Dane asked, laughing.

“The same...maybe.”

Later that night though, she was sitting in her apartment by herself and flipping through the channels for something to watch.

Overall, it was a decent holiday. Or like they normally were.

She didn’t really think she and Dane were damaged, but sometimes when their parents were critical of her life and decisions it felt that way.

That maybe they were looking at her and Dane and wondering if there were traits in them from their biological parents rather than the way they were raised.

When her phone went off with a text, she reached for it on the table and was stunned to see it was from Royce.

It was the first time he’d texted her cell phone and she only knew it was him because she’d put his number in her phone so she wouldn’t be caught off guard.

Yet here she was with her heart frantically racing that he was reaching out.

He’d said Merry Christmas, so she returned the same greeting. Maybe he was trying to see if she was busy or not.

Yep, next text asked how her day went and if she was home.

Since he started this she was going to assume he could talk and she didn’t really want to text.

She pressed the button to call and it rang four times and she figured maybe that was a miscalculation on her part.

“Hello,” he said right when she thought it’d go to voicemail.

“Did I catch you going to the bathroom or something?” she asked, laughing.

“Actually,” he said, “you did. I didn’t think you’d call.”

“I hope you washed your hands.”

There was silence and she figured she might be pushing it, but he laughed. “Always. Are you home?”

“I am. And glad of it. I saw more people than I cared to today.”

“The same,” he said.

“I didn’t think I’d hear from you,” she said. It’d been three weeks and yet he decides to reach out on Christmas Day. That made no sense at all to her.

“It’s been busy. Or work has. Then family. A long day too.”

She could tell by his voice that maybe he didn’t have that pleasant of a holiday. “Everything okay?”

“It’s fine,” he said. “Do you have plans tomorrow?”

“I don’t,” she said, grinning. “Do you?”

“I was hoping maybe we could discuss these ground rules some more.”

She laughed. “Gladly. I think I need it after today.”

There was a sound that made her think he was snorting and trying to cover it up with a cough on the other end. “We might

have felt the same way today. I had to visit my mother and that is more than trying for a day. But the good news is, I shouldn't have to do it again for a year."

He didn't normally talk about personal things in his life and she was shocked he was too. "I wish I could go that long with my parents. I love them and all, but there is a time when you can only be criticized so much."

"Hey," he said. "Sounds like our days mirrored each other. I know the perfect thing to overcome that."

"What's that?" she asked. She knew she was smiling as her face felt like it couldn't be stretched anymore.

"Sex," he said.

"The no-strings-attached kind," she threw in there.

"You've got it," he said. "We just need to get those rules meshed out."

"Are we going to need a contract?" she asked. She was joking and when he laughed she assumed he knew that.

"I hope not. Unless it's just between the two of us. I thought first and foremost no one else would know about this."

She didn't remember saying no one else would know, just the Fierces. But then maybe she did say that.

It's not like she wanted any of her friends or family to be aware.

"It's all going to be between the two of us only," she said. "And I can't wait."

"Neither can I," he said.

"Well then, your place or mine for this meet-up tomorrow?"

“I’ll text you my address,” he said. “If you’re good with that.”

“That works,” she said, looking around her small place. He might feel claustrophobic in it.

They talked a few more minutes and hung up.

Her brother had asked her earlier if she was happy and she’d been honest when she said she wasn’t unhappy in life.

But if he asked her right now, she’d say she was ecstatic.

A GREAT REASON

“So what was your holiday like that it prompted you to reach out to me after not doing it for weeks?” Chloe asked the minute she took her jacket off in his house.

Royce should have figured it would come up and had to decide on how much he was going to talk.

“Being horny isn’t a good enough reason?” he asked with a grin on his face.

“It’s a great reason considering what we are going to discuss, but it’s been weeks. I find it hard to believe yesterday was the day you reached a point where you couldn’t hold out any longer.”

He laughed. She was being a good sport about this. “No. I mean yes, I’ve been thinking about this for weeks, but as I said, work and life got in the way.” He stopped for a second and then said, “Yesterday just reminded me once again that I’ve got to stop doing that.”

“Ahh, someone got on your case about only focusing on work?” she asked.

“You sound like you know that from experience,” he said.

“More than I’d like,” she said drily. “Before we get to those ground rules, you look like there is more you want to say.”

He wasn’t surprised she’d figured that out. They said they were going to keep this strictly sex, but there was no reason they couldn’t be part of the friends dynamic of it too. Maybe then she’d get an idea of why he agreed to go this route.

Matter of fact, he’d like to know more about her reason too.

“Sure,” he said. “A little background from both of us might help. It seems we both had a trigger yesterday to get this moving.”

She laughed. “You had the trigger. I’ve been ready for weeks or I wouldn’t have suggested this.”

She had a point. “True. You know my parents are divorced, correct?”

“I do,” she said. “And you spent some time with your mother yesterday.”

“Yes. Elise and I drove there. About ninety minutes in the car and back and the few hours there felt like a lifetime. My mother is remarried. Her husband, Steve, was a widower with two kids. They’ve been married about fifteen years or so, dated a year to two before. I try not to keep track.”

“Are you close with Steve or your stepsiblings?”

“No,” he said. “I see Steve when I’m guilted into visiting and he’s nice enough and tries to keep the peace between my mother and us. As for his kids, it’s been years. They try not to bring us together for anything. We had brunch there and left, his kids showed up later.”

“Hmm. I find that odd. Do you not all get along?”

“Can I get you a drink or something?” She’d walked in the front door, took her coat off and he hung it up and then she moved to the living room with him and sat. He’d seen her eyes looking around his house though.

“Water is good,” she said.

He got up and she followed him to the kitchen. “I don’t have a problem with Steve’s kids, but they don’t care for my mother by the sounds of it. I don’t blame them. I don’t get along with her either.”

“Can I ask why?”

He grabbed her water while she got comfortable at the island, so he got one for himself. “Well, yesterday she took her mood out on Elise and me and I told Steve I was sure it was so she could get it out of her system for having to be nice to his kids when they showed up.”

“That’s horrible,” she said.

“The truth often is,” he said.

“What did Steve say?”

“Nothing, like always. He just nodded and continued to show me the blueprints of the addition they were putting on his house. I say his house because it’s the one he had with his wife and kids before my mother. He won’t leave it and it seems to me the only way to get her to stay is if he does these changes for her.”

“His life,” she said.

“Exactly. My mother left my father. She liked the money from the business but not the work or time it took to get that

money. She wanted to be waited on and adored and didn't get that."

Chloe cringed. "I can't profess to know what it'd be like to want someone to do that to me. I just want to be left alone half the time."

He'd store that away in the back of his mind for now. It wasn't a bad thing when he didn't have much time to give her anyway.

"When my mother decided that she wasn't going to get what she wanted and deserved to be happy in life, she left. She wanted Elise to go with her and my sister fought back. She was closer to my father and refused to leave him."

"Wanted Elise and not you?" she asked.

"I'm too much like my father and I wouldn't go. I didn't like the way she talked to him and treated him. It wasn't much different than she did to me." He didn't think going into this that he'd say as much as he was but might as well tell her so she got the bigger picture. "My mother didn't like the work that my father did. That he came home dirty and sweaty and in her eyes smelled on hot days."

"Of course he did," she said. "It's hard work. She knew what he did for a living when she met him, right?"

"She did," he said. "I'm not sure if she thought she could change him. Or as the business grew that he'd step back. I don't profess to know what went through her head and wouldn't want to get lost in the maze either."

She laughed. "I can understand that statement too."

"Elise was a tomboy. She enjoyed being with my father and having the freedom to be herself. My father didn't stick her in a mold like my mother was trying to do to everyone. My

mother only wanted Elise with her because she knew it'd look bad if a daughter chose to stay with their father. Not many would think anything of me staying. I was with my father all the time and knew after college I'd come back to the business. That it'd be mine someday. Elise wanted her part too and my father was thrilled. My mother not so much."

"Crazy how she only wanted Elise with her for how it looked and not for love."

"That's right," he said. "And we knew it. My mother has never let Elise forget it. Things have just gotten worse over the years. Which brings me back to yesterday. There was more than one sarcastic shot at Elise and she was drinking mimosas the minute we walked in the door."

Chloe started to laugh. "I can't see you drinking that."

"No. I wouldn't and didn't. I had a beer the minute we were back with my father. So did Elise. When my mother wasn't on Elise's case she was on my back about being single and just like my father would always be that way. Putting the business first wasn't smart and I should see how it turned out."

"Ahh, so that is why you decided to give me a call. You know you don't have the time and I'm fine with it. Might as well not be so lonely then?"

She was grinning when she said it, but he didn't like to hear those words. "That makes it sound horrible," he said.

"It's fine. I know going in. That's why we are talking. I'm not going to change you or ask you for things you don't want to give."

"Thanks," he said. "When push comes to shove, the business will come to me. My father's heart attack a few years ago set him back and made him step back."

“Which meant you had to step up?” she asked.

“Yes. Elise too. She does all the business office-type things. I’m out on the sites. We just keep growing and though I’ve got a lot of good guys it seems I’m always down men or looking for them too. My father does that or a good part of it. He fills in on the sites when I need it or talks to clients. He does more of the admin work on the construction side and that is fine.”

“It frees it up from you,” she said.

“It does, but it’s building. I’m not complaining. The busier we are the better for business.”

“Hence the reason you’ve got no time. Or maybe you are afraid to find some woman that is going to think like your mother. To look at your wealth but hate that it’s from hard labor and not a suit and tie. I bet you look good in a suit and tie, but you’re looking pretty good in jeans too.”

He laughed at her. “This is the first I’ve seen you not in work attire. Casual looks good on you too,” he said.

He wasn’t going to address her comment about worrying that he’d find a woman like his mother. It seemed that was part of what he’d done before. Not someone always critical of how he looked after a day’s worth of work but just the time he spent on his job and not her.

“Why, thank you,” she said, flipping her hair from one side to the other.

“So we get back to Durham yesterday and Elise and I were able to relax at my father’s and be ourselves. To me that is important and what my father always encouraged. Elise wanted to bitch about my mother and my father cut her off. He said he didn’t care and it was best to not talk of it and know

the visit was over. Better to relax and enjoy the day with the three of us.”

“Wise words,” she said. “I’ll have to remember them after I spend a day with my parents though they aren’t quite as bad as your mother. Or I guess my day wasn’t that bad. Just more of what Dane and I have heard most of our lives.”

“Dane?” he asked.

“My brother. That is part of my story from yesterday.”

“Now that I spilled my guts, I think it’s time you do the same. I hope that helped you understand why I’m in the situation I’m in and I’d like to hear why you are too. Then we can get down to those rules.”

She took another sip of her water and said, “My guts aren’t going to be as messy as yours, but they are still frustrating. Show me around your house while I gather my thoughts, if you don’t mind.”

“I can do that,” he said. They both stood up. “This is the kitchen.”

She winked at him. “I figured that out myself. A nice kitchen too. I’m going to assume you did all the work in this house.”

“I wouldn’t hire anyone,” he said, rolling his eyes.

She poked him in the side with her finger and he flinched. Not from pain but from the surprise of that action. She only laughed at him though.

HERE WE ARE

Chloe was shocked Royce told her as much as he had. There was part of her that felt sympathy for the kid that was treated so poorly by one parent but at least had the other in his corner.

Her parents were never that bad with her. She was loved and knew it. It's just the type of love got on her nerves more than it should.

"I know this house isn't new and you're not old enough to have built it unless your business built it at one point."

He grinned. "My father did build this house about twenty-five years ago. A few years ago I decided I wanted my own place. It was easy to rent and not deal with the maintenance of anything, but the problem with that is I couldn't change things either."

"I could see where that might be annoying," she said.

"It was," he said. "There were things I wanted to fix but couldn't touch and had to wait for maintenance. After a while I decided to look on the market."

"You didn't want to build your own house?" she asked.

"Takes too long," he said, smirking.

They were walking around his place and she could see almost every room had been updated. The paint looked fresh and light. The kitchen was stunning, all white and gray. He had an office, living room, family room, dining room, half bath and first floor primary suite. She only popped her head in there. She'd see it soon enough she was sure.

Then they made their way upstairs where there were three more bedrooms, another full bath and a bonus room over the garage with a half bath. Or a FROG as it was called.

"Your workout room?" she asked. There was weight equipment in one corner of the room and a pool table in the other.

"Yeah," he said. "I don't have a lot of company so I didn't think anyone would care that there were weights on one side and the pool table on the other."

She picked up a stick and bent over, aimed at the cue ball and sunk one in a right hand pocket. "This could be fun."

"You play?" he asked.

"I did in college. It was something to do but haven't touched it in a long time. It was more a fun place to hang out at times."

"The same," he said.

"Your house is beautiful, but I expected no less," she said. "And now you want to know more about my story."

"I'd like that," he said. "Whatever you want to tell me."

Instead of going back into the living room, they went to the family room off the kitchen. Royce sat in a leather recliner, so she got on the couch facing him.

“I can’t say I’ve had it as difficult as you have with your parents. Mine just want to see me settled down. They tell me all the time I don’t compromise and that is why I’m single.”

“Compromise over what?” he asked.

“My time,” she said. “I don’t need to be around people. I don’t always even like to go out. I like my space and privacy. Not that I’m a super private person, but I don’t share often either. Maybe I just don’t like people that much.”

“I don’t believe you don’t like people. I think you are just no nonsense. You like what you like and don’t want to... compromise.”

“Exactly. But I know I have to. I’m friendly and professional in my job. I go out with friends, but I’m not sure I’m super close with all that many people. I think it’s because I’ve put my career first. It’s still a male-dominated field.”

Though Fierce was more progressive than other firms, she was still outnumbered by the males. And oftentimes had to fight harder to be heard and seen for her work and not being a woman.

“Plus there are men like Tony Waters,” he said.

“True,” she said. “I just push it off and ignore him and know outside of that job I won’t have to see or deal with him again.”

“It’s the best attitude to have,” he said.

“Back to me. I’ve dated, but it seems the men I’m with tend to want to do things that I’m not interested in. It’s not that I won’t give it a try. I do. Don’t think that.”

“You don’t come across as the type of woman that always has to have it her way.”

She laughed. “My mother might argue otherwise.”

“We’ve established that my mother is opinionated too.”

“My brother gets it too, but he’s divorced. He’s a pediatrician and a few years older than me. He’s got two kids, Tiffani is five and Tyler is three. He had them when he was doing his residency.”

“That had to be hard. Talk about having to put your career first,” he said.

“Which led to the end of his marriage. His ex wanted the life of the wife of a doctor but didn’t want to wait for kids. Dane wasn’t sure he wanted them so early, but Melanie said she had it covered. That she knew he had to focus on his career and it’d be fine.”

“But it wasn’t?” he asked.

“No. Dane really didn’t want a second child right away, but Melanie did. She realized it was harder than she thought even though her parents, my parents and I were helping too.”

“Sounds like she got more help than if it was only Dane,” he said.

“I thought so. It’s neither here nor there. Six months after Dane started to practice, Melanie said that it wasn’t what she’d thought it’d be and left. Dane was devastated and I saw that. He put everything he had into his career and marriage and put himself last. He’s a great laid-back guy and now he shares custody of the kids with Melanie. They’ve been making it work for the past year or so.”

“Good for him,” he said. “My parents weren’t civil after the divorce and my father doesn’t even want to talk about my mother. My mother only brings my father up to still trash him years later. It’s like she can’t let go.”

“Which makes no sense since she moved on,” she said.

“Exactly.”

“Yesterday my mother made a few comments once again about me being single and now Dane. As if Dane is even considering dating right now. I later found out that Melanie told him she is seeing someone. She did it quickly when he picked the kids up knowing there’d be no time to talk about it.”

“That’s horrible. Dropping a bomb and then making him sit on it hoping it doesn’t explode.”

“I think their marriage was like that often and it’s better in the long run it didn’t work out. I felt bad for Dane and we talked some when my parents were in the other room. The kids were playing.” She took a deep breath and figured she got this far, might as well say the rest. “I asked him if he thought we were damaged.”

“Damaged?” Royce asked. “If anyone should be, it’s me for the way my mother has been and I don’t think I’m damaged. Why would you think you are?”

“Dane didn’t think it either. We are both adopted. We’ve known it most of our lives. My parents were open about it. I remember Dane coming home one day when he was in elementary school and asking why my parents were blondes and we weren’t. I think they figured it was the best time to finally tell us.”

“How old were you?” he asked.

“Five, I think. It was hard to understand what they were saying, but I got it. I believed them when they said it was never meant to be a secret, but they had to figure out the time to tell us so that we understood.”

“Were you hurt or upset by it?”

“No,” she said honestly. “I accepted it. I didn’t see a reason not to. Even back then I knew it was not like I could change anything. I know my biological mother’s name. It was an open adoption. I was a few days old when I went home with them. My birth mother was a teenager, no father listed. Either she didn’t know or didn’t say. Dane was three months old when he was adopted. Same situation. Teen parent who thought they could handle it and realized they couldn’t.”

“Which had to be harder yet to let go of,” he said.

“I’m sure, but neither of us has ever thought of that life. We love our parents and they gave us a good one, but I do wonder at times if *they* think we are damaged. I’m still single and in my mother’s eyes, unbending to compromise if I even meet a guy. Dane’s marriage failed.”

“Lots of marriages fail,” he said.

She knew that. “My parents often ask if I’m skittish because of Dane’s marriage and I’m not sure how many times I have to tell them that it has nothing to do with it or me. Maybe I just haven’t found the right person yet? Maybe I am unbending? No clue. I think I’ll figure it out when it happens. But in the meantime...here we are.”

“Here we are,” he said.

“We know the Fierces and your father seem to think we are a good fit,” she said. “I’m not sure I like that someone else is trying to pair me up.”

“The same,” he said. “My father isn’t normally like this and I’m not sure why he is now. I want to think Grant and Garrett put a bug in his ear, but I can’t put the blame on them either.”

“No,” she said. “I know they mean well. They are having fun too, but I’m not sure I’m ready or willing to go along.”

“Which is why rule number one—no one knows,” he said.

She nodded her head. “Not the Fierces. Not my family nor my friends or coworkers.”

“My father won’t know. Neither will coworkers or my sister.”

“Rule number two,” she said. “We need to make sure there is enough chemistry between us to get further down the list of rules.”

He smirked at her and the juices that had been slowly being squeezed in her body just let loose and all but flooded her.

His hair was a little messy as if he’d run his fingers through it. He had a tight cotton shirt on that let her see he had some pretty damn good arms on him. But she knew that already having worked with him for years in the warmer weather when he was wearing T-shirts.

Jeans were his normal attire and he had the same on today. No shoes or boots though, just socks and she saw he had some pretty big feet to go with his hands and the rest of his body.

He stood up and held his hand out. “Do we try this chemistry?” His dark blue eyes were almost dancing mischievously.

“It’s the only way to find out,” she said, standing. “Otherwise the rest of this process is a waste.”

There was a rumble low in his throat that turned her on even more. In her eyes the chemistry was clearly there, but it’s not like he could see it.

“I don’t think it’s a waste, but we’ll find out.”

She put her hand in his and he yanked her hard into his chest, she landed with a thud and a laugh, then his hand slipped into her hair and held her head in place while his mouth lowered to hers.

There was nothing slow with this kiss. It was hard and it was fast and it was aggressive.

His tongue swooped in and started to mate with hers and her hands went to his waist and held on because there was part of her that felt her legs were going to give out from under her, that he was only holding her up by his hands in her hair.

He turned his head and angled another way and she let him because there was no way she wanted this kiss to end.

By the bulge pressing against her stomach she got the answer she was looking for.

He finally lifted his head and looked down at her. “Well?” he asked. “Not a waste, huh?”

“Absolutely not,” she said, pulling his head down for another kiss.

PLAY DUMB

The following Saturday, Royce found himself walking into Fierce Engineering in his nicest pair of dark jeans, shoes and a button-down shirt. He wasn't putting a tie on for anything and Chloe informed him he didn't need to. That the New Year's Eve party was casual. Though he knew that didn't mean he could show up in his work boots either.

He'd been invited to this party last year but turned it down. He liked the Fierces and all, but it was a business relationship.

Now with the partnership it was more and his father had told him over a month ago he should attend.

He hadn't wanted to until things started to form with Chloe.

Though he and Chloe had one hell of a make-out session at his house on Monday, they didn't go any further. Not that he thought they would, but he would have been game for it.

They hashed out a few more ground rules. One being that they'd remain professional regardless of how long this went on or ended.

He agreed. No reason not to. He liked her as a person and was going to enjoy her more, he knew.

Another rule was they gave the other notice and if one person couldn't make it last minute, there were no hard feelings. He'd never done this before but knew friends that did.

Hormones could run wild and a need for relief could arise. If this was going to be sex only and they did not want to be seen out together, then there was no reason or need to go on any dates. But last minute booty calls weren't always going to work for either of them.

Once they got that all out of the way, tonight was going to be the night.

They'd both be here and they'd have to keep their distance from the other too. Then they'd leave separate from each other to not draw attention and go back to his place.

He was surprised he was as nervous as he was over this when he'd never been nervous about having sex with a woman he'd been thinking about this much before.

This should be easy with the way they had it all set up and yet it almost seemed like a lot of work to make sure no one was on to them.

Thankfully, Elise didn't come tonight. She'd been invited along with their father, but his dad was going to a buddy's house for poker and Elise had other plans too.

"Royce," Garrett Fierce said, moving toward him. "So glad you could make it this year. You know a lot of the people here, but please help yourself to anything. I can introduce you around if you'd like?"

"I'm good," he said. "I know you'll be greeting a lot of people. I see your son waving to me, so I'll go talk with him."

Garrett turned his head. “Yes, I forgot you know Drake well. Not sure if you met his twin, Noah, but I’m sure you will now.”

He nodded and moved to Drake. He hadn’t seen him much lately though Drake was working on this project too. He’d worked with Ryder several times too as an architect when they were doing developments or new builds.

“Glad you could make it,” Drake said, putting his hand out. “Not sure if you’ve met Noah or not.”

“No,” he said, shaking hands with Drake’s twin. He knew Noah was a high school principal.

“Good to meet you too,” Noah said. “We thought we’d pull you away from our father before he started to get to work. Stay clear of him, my uncle, mother, and aunt and you should get out of here unscathed.”

Shit. Guess the whole family was aware of what was going on. “Excuse me?” he said. He was going to play dumb on this if he could. He only knew because of Chloe and was guessing his father was playing into this, but it’d be nice to hear it from the family more directly.

“You know our father and uncle want to set Chloe up. Everyone knows it here. Your name and hers have been in the same sentence more times than we can count.”

He didn’t know what to say to this. “I’m not so keen on being set up by anyone,” he said. “Though I know it’s worked out for you two.”

“We got lovely wives out of it,” Drake said. “And kids too.”

He hadn’t talked to Kara Fierce before, but Elise did. He didn’t even know who Noah’s wife was other than he’d been

set up. But he did know that both of the men in front of him had a set of twins themselves.

“I’m just here for the party,” he said.

“You tell yourself that,” Noah said. “We never saw it coming.”

“Yet you are telling me?” he said.

“We saw it coming,” Drake said. “By then we knew what was going on since our cousins all went through it. Sam and Bryce didn’t see it, but you and I were on top of it.”

“If you say so,” Noah said. “They are sneaky and we are used to it now.”

Royce was looking around the room to see if he could find Chloe. He knew she was here, as she’d told him she was staying after work. It was eight now and he figured four hours was going to be his limit to mingle.

“Royce,” Ryder Fierce said, moving over to him. “Good to see you here, you brave man. This is my wife, Marissa.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said, shaking her hand.

Before he could say anything else, two other women came over and Drake was saying, “Meet our better halves. This is my wife, Kara, and Noah’s wife, Paige. Ladies, this is Royce Kennedy.”

“Oh, you’re the one they think is next on the list,” Paige said. “I’m always amazed how they do it. You’d think they’d be too busy working it with Jonah and Megan tonight.”

He knew Megan was friends with Chloe and was currently dating Jonah Davenport. The brother of Raina McMillan, who he just remembered was also the brother-in-law of Ryder. One

of those conversations he and Chloe had this week while she was laying things out for tonight.

No, wrong term. While they were planning for this night.

She'd told him people would be watching her and him, but he didn't expect it to be this bad.

"As I was saying before you arrived, I'm good with going about my life on my own."

There was a round of laughter to that and all he could do was smile.

"Good evening, everyone," Chloe said, moving over. He hadn't even seen her when he looked around, but she came from behind him. "Royce, it's nice to see you. It's been a while."

There was more laughter there as if they were aware of the joke going on, but he trusted her to not tell anyone. She'd said she didn't want anyone to think poorly of her for doing this and he wouldn't want that either.

"It has been," he said. "Work and the holidays and all. How were your holidays?"

"Good and I'm glad they are over," Chloe said. "Family isn't all it's cracked up to be."

"No," Royce said. "It's not. Not unless it seems your last name is Fierce."

There was more laughter there and seven sets of eyes on him. It felt as if there were more in the room that he couldn't see, but the Fierce kids in front of him were clearly enjoying this.

"I just wanted to come say hi. I'm being waved over by a few people. Have a good night."

Chloe walked away and he didn't turn to watch even though he wanted to. He had to make sure he wasn't staring at her and what she was wearing while she was there for a few minutes.

Again, those damn eyes.

"You are going to give my father a fit," Ryder said.

"Sorry for that," he said. "It's not my plan to give anyone a fit but not fall into their plans either."

"It's never anyone's plan," Jade Fierce said, moving over. "And here we are circling the wagon of the next target. You brave man. Stand your ground."

"I was trying to do that," he said.

"Was?" Jade asked, lifting an eyebrow.

Stupid slip. "Am doing that, but it seems the Fierce clan is pulling me in."

"Nope," Drake said. "More like warning you if you didn't already know. Did you?"

"I might have had some suspicions," he said. "My father isn't nearly as good at being sneaky as your fathers."

"Oh boy," Noah said. "They recruited your dad in on this. That's a good one."

"I'm not so sure," he said. "Let's just say your fathers' escapades precede them."

After five minutes, he found himself wandering off to talk with someone else and realized that he'd all but exhausted some of those he knew other than Chloe.

He shouldn't have done that, but he was friendly enough to figure it out.

He went to get a drink and was looking around for Chloe again so he could get a better glance at her than what he had when she popped over to say hi.

Staying away from her too much tonight was going to be harder than he thought.

But he found her talking to Jade, the two of them laughing.

She had on a pair of black pants that fit her better than any other pair he'd seen on her before. She had black pumps on her feet raising her up some and a burgundy-and-black silk shirt with a few buttons undone that he'd been trying his hardest not to stare at when she was by him not that long ago.

It was almost as if she sensed his eyes on her and her head turned and they made eye contact. Jade said something and the two of them laughed again and Chloe's face seemed to flush.

He could only imagine what was said and he lifted his eyes to look past her but have his head in the same direction. No easier way to get caught than to turn his head fast as if he was trying to avoid what he was doing.



“YOU GUYS MIGHT STRIKE out on this one,” Ryder said to Garrett two hours later.

“What?” Grant asked his son. “Not sure what you are talking about.”

“Please,” Ryder said. “Everyone knows you are working it hard. You're splitting your time between hosting this party, talking with Megan and Jonah and now Royce and Chloe. The last two don't seem to be cooperating with you.”

He was going to deny what his son was saying, but his brother spoke first. “Why is this one so hard?” Garrett asked.

Jade slid over when Garrett asked that. “Dad, you two can’t win them all. I told Mom and Aunt Diane that not so long ago. Maybe it’s that you are spreading yourselves too thin.”

“We aren’t spreading ourselves thin,” he said. “We’ve got this covered.”

Might as well admit it at this point. The longer he and Garrett and their wives tried to deny it the more wasted time there was.

“You always say that,” Ryder said.

“And we always come out on top in the end,” Garrett said.

“I’m not so sure this time,” Jade said. “Royce and Chloe have barely talked to each other.”

“I saw her go to Royce when he first showed up. Ryder, what was said?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Ryder said. He didn’t think his son was going to help him.

“Chloe and Royce didn’t talk at all?” Garrett asked, frowning.

“Nothing for you to latch onto,” Ryder said. “She came over and said hi, that she hadn’t seen him in a while, asked how his holiday was and then moved on.”

“That’s not very much,” Grant said.

“Nope,” Jade said. “And I was talking to Chloe. She is fully aware of what you guys are doing and has said she has no

intention of being played. She said she even told you both she isn't interested in being set up."

"No one is ever interested, but that doesn't mean they don't fall for it," he said.

Jade shrugged. "Well, then you better get ready for some hard work this time if you think you can pull this off."

Ryder and Jade moved off and Grant was left standing there off to the side of the party with his brother. "Do you think they are right?" he asked Garrett.

"Who the hell knows? Maybe we are spread too thin."

"Don't let them get in your head," Grant said. "We've got this covered."

"That's right," Garrett said. "Let's stay positive."

"It's the only way to make it work," he said, slapping his brother on the back.

READY TO LET LOOSE

““**Y**ou’re not even going to go talk to Royce?”
Megan said to her.

“I did when he got here,” Chloe argued.
“Why?”

“Oh,” Megan said. “I didn’t see it.”

She held her sigh back. This was much harder than she thought it was going to be.

She was here a full three hours before Royce showed up and it was getting close to midnight and all she’d done was talk to him twice. Once when he showed up so that he knew she saw him and then another time they actually bumped into each other in the hallway returning from the bathroom.

Once she knew no one was around, she pulled him to another part of the building where they couldn’t be seen, asked him for an update since she’d seen multiple Fierce family members talking to him and then she filled him in on what was going on on her end.

They both laughed and he leaned down to give her a quick kiss before they parted ways checking to see if they were still on for tonight.

No way she was backing out when she'd been thinking about this for days.

Her body was ready to let loose when she stood next to him hours ago and it was extremely hard to keep it in.

Then when Jade approached her and started to make jokes about Royce looking at her, she flushed but did catch his eye for a brief second until he glanced away.

"I didn't know so many people were going to be watching me," she said. "It's not like he and I had plans or anything to be here together."

"True," Megan said.

"How about you and Jonah? You'd think that they'd be watching the two of you. Why are you here with me and not talking to your boyfriend?"

Megan sighed. "He went to get another drink."

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," Megan said. "It's fine. Enough about me, I wanted to see about you, but it looks as if there isn't much to report."

"Nope," she said. "Sorry." There was part of her that felt bad she was lying, but was she really? There wasn't much to report. They'd had no action yet.

"Win some and lose some," Megan said. "I think you should at least consider it an option though. They aren't always wrong."

"So noted," she said, taking a sip of her soda.

Jonah came back over with his drink and she noticed that he seemed off but kept it to herself. Didn't look to her as if it was all sunshine and roses with that latest match but not her

problem today. Megan would tell her more if there was something to say.

Her problem was getting through the next ten minutes and then driving the fifteen minutes to Royce's house without creaming herself before she could even get her clothes off and see him naked.

There had been no plans on whether she'd stay the night. She realized now that it wasn't something they talked about and she wondered why.

Then she told herself they couldn't plan it all out so she'd just let this play out as it did. She'd leave and go home if she had to, no biggie.

When people started to count down to midnight she looked around and saw Royce by another of her colleagues talking. It was as if he knew her eyes were seeking him and he glanced her way, she turned to someone else after she smiled.

People were shouting Happy New Year and toasting and she was just ready to get the hell out of there.

There was no way they were leaving together and she hoped they planned it well.

Within five minutes people were gathering jackets and leaving, Royce being one of them. Her coat was up in her office with her purse, so she went in that direction with a few other employees. Perfect, there would be witnesses that she left alone, as many obviously knew what was going on.

When she got out to her car, there were a lot of vehicles leaving at once and she didn't see Royce's truck. She had no clue where it'd been parked anyway, but she knew her way to his house and drove there.

Surprisingly, when she pulled into his driveway the garage door was down and she started to wonder if she beat him here, but she saw the front porch light on and he wouldn't have left that for himself if he entered through the garage.

She got out and went to the front porch and the door opened, Royce standing there waiting for her with a big smile on his face.

“Anyone follow you here?”

She started to laugh. “I don't think so.”

“Good,” he said, shutting the door and yanking her hard into his chest like he did one week ago here.

His mouth came down on hers and their hands were both moving over the other's body.

Her jacket was helped off and ended up on the floor she was sure. She didn't care and it's not like she was going to stop kissing him to look.

His big hands slid up the side of her waist and to the front, cupping her breasts over her shirt. “I'm not sure I can wait that long, Royce.”

“I guess I don't need to ask if you're still sure then.”

She let out a laugh. “I drove here, didn't I? You're lucky I didn't start touching myself in the car on the ride.”

“Shit,” he said. His hands went to the buttons on her shirt while he tugged it out of the waist of her pants. “You wore this on purpose. I know you did. You never wear anything this low cut.”

“Do you like it?” she asked.

He had all the buttons undone and her shirt hanging open, her bra exposed. “I do,” he said. “And like this even better.”

Her black lace bra hooked in the front, he found it fast and undid it, her breasts spilling out and him lifting her up so that his mouth went right to one perky nipple that stood firm when the cool air hit it.

She didn't like the feeling of hanging there, so she wrapped her legs around his hips and held on while he moved his mouth from one breast to the other. Her head was back, the feelings he was evoking in her too much for her to even have the strength to stand anyway.

Her fingers went into his hair and held him in place, not wanting him to stop. She even started to grind against his hips hoping for some relief.

“Oh no,” he said. “Don't you finish without me.”

“I have no intention of that,” she said. “But you might have to hurry up because it's just been way too long. We can pay more attention to other areas of the body another time.”

He dropped her back down, her legs unstable on her black heels, the heat of his body lost and her regret from opening her mouth visible.

“Pants off,” he said.

She toed her shoes off and started to laugh. His bedroom was on this floor, but it seemed as if neither of them was going to be able to make it that far.

He was pulling his wallet out and had a condom in his hand as she undid her pants and pushed them down with her underwear at about the same time as he lowered his and covered his massive cock.

Damn, she didn't even get a chance to admire it before he had her up in his arms again, her legs around his waist and him finding her slick opening and sliding in.

"Jesus," she said, her head back again. Her shirt was on and that was it. Her breasts were plastered against the blue shirt he'd had on and the mixture of her hardened nipples and his soft shirt was another erotic sensation slamming through her body.

His hips were jerking up in her and all she wanted to do was hold still and feel him inside of her, but the other part of her brain was telling her she needed so much more.

He moved a few steps closer to the wall. She wasn't sure how he managed that without tripping with his jeans just lowered.

But she felt the wall against her back, one of his hands removed from her body and bracing the wall, and he was thrusting in and out of her while he balanced himself.

"Oh God," he said. "I hope to hell you are close because I don't want to embarrass myself and get there first."

She didn't have a chance to respond before the orgasm slammed into her out of nowhere.

She was pretty sure she was all but screeching his name out, but he only muffled the sound by kissing her and slamming into her in jerky motions, her back almost getting a burn from the wall and the friction.

Did she care? Hell no!

She was too busy making sure she could feel everything to the fullest and noticed that her muscles were still pulsing around Royce's cock. When they finally stopped, she could feel him still twitching inside of her.

Slowly her legs fell to the floor, but he still remained supporting her. “Happy New Year,” he said.

She grinned. “Happy New Year to you too.”

“That was faster than I thought it’d be,” he said. “Nor did I plan on it in the entryway.”

“No worries,” she said. “I’m not sure I could have managed to walk to your bedroom.”

He lifted his jeans back in place though he had to take care of the condom and grabbed her hand and pulled her to his bedroom.

“We’ve got a lot of ground to make up,” he said. “We should try the bed next.”

“We should,” she said, taking off her shirt and bra. “I believe you’re overdressed.”

“I can take care of that,” he said, his eyes roaming over her body. “Damn. I need more time to check you out.”

“I’d like to at least check you out in the first place. More than what I see now,” she said, her eyes on his cock.

“Get in bed,” he said. “If you want.”

“I’ll be there,” she said and watched him walk into his bathroom. This was going to be one hell of a night and she was glad she’d come up with this proposition!

SIMPLE BOOTY CALL

““M

orning,” Royce said.
Chloe turned and looked at the sexy man standing in the doorway of his bedroom the next morning. She stretched her arms over her head and pointed her toes. There were a lot of muscles that hurt in her body but in a lovely way.

“What time is it?” she asked. There was no clock in his room and she wasn’t sure where her phone was. Maybe in her purse that was dropped by the door when she came in. She was too busy getting her hands on Royce to worry about something silly like her pocketbook.

“It’s nine,” he said.

“I never sleep this late,” she said and was going to throw the covers back but realized she was naked. Hmm, it didn’t seem like an issue last night when they were both wearing the same birthday suit, but him dressed in sweats and a T-shirt, barefoot in front of her and looking mighty yummy made her feel insecure enough to snuggle in some more.

“We didn’t close our eyes until after three I believe.”

“Good point. And I was up at six yesterday morning, so that makes sense.”

“Sorry to wake you,” he said. “But I’m starving.”

“I find I am too.”

“I wanted to make some breakfast but figured if I was going to cook something I should see what you liked or wanted.”

Her heart was fluttering. “You’re going to make me breakfast?”

“I need to eat too,” he said.

They were supposed to be keeping this light and friendly, and though this conversation was, there was part of this situation that was rather domestic to her too.

“I’m not really fussy so whatever you are making I’ll have too. Coffee is a must,” she said.

“I wasn’t sure if you drank it,” he said. “I’ve never seen you walking around with a cup in your hand like so many do. How do you like it?”

“Cream if you’ve got it, if not, maybe milk and some sugar?”

“I’ve got cream,” he said.

“We drink our coffee the same?” she asked, finding that funny. She pictured him the type to drink it black and dark.

“Is that a problem that I like some cream in my coffee?” he said, grinning at her.

“No. Just that we don’t know those things about each other but yet found out a bunch of things last night.”

“We did,” he said. “I put your bag on the chair for you. Hope that was okay.”

She glanced over and saw her purse and bag on the chair in his room. Last night after her second orgasm, though she was exhausted, she didn't want to overstay her welcome and said she should probably leave.

He'd told her he didn't see the need unless she wanted to. It was the next day anyway and if she left then, he could get another taste of her once he got a nap in.

She'd thought it was funny and admitted that she planned and had a bag in her car but didn't want to assume. It was sweet he went out and got it for her.

"That's fine," she said.

He stood there leaning on the doorframe as if he was almost challenging her to get out of bed naked. She wasn't sure why she was so self-conscious of this and decided to throw the covers back and strut to the chair and then take a shower.

The minute she was standing, he grinned at her. "I'll go get your coffee and start breakfast while you shower if you want."

"Thanks," she said. He moved out of the doorway before she had her bag in her hand and she went into the bathroom to clean up as quickly as she could.

The bathroom was just as stunning as the rest of his house she was seeing in the light of day now.

She turned the shower on and then went to the bathroom. The water was nice and hot by the time she stepped in. No reason to wash her hair. She'd tied it up before she got in anyway.

She grabbed his soap, something strong and fresh and not at all like her soft citrus-smelling one she used. It'd get the job done though.

She hurried up and got out once she was rinsed off and grabbed a towel that he'd had close by on a rack. She should have hunted one out of the closet but wouldn't walk on the floor and drip water everywhere now.

When she was in the kitchen she smelled bacon and cinnamon. "Yum," she said. "Are you making me French toast?"

He poured her a cup of coffee from a pot. She noticed that it made single cups too but since he refilled his own cup, she didn't care.

The creamer was out of the fridge and in his hand. Nothing fancy or sweet like vanilla or something different. Just plain old cream and she was totally fine with that too.

"I am making French toast. Happy New Year, by the way."

"Oh yeah," she said. "But we did say it to each other last night too."

"We did," he said. "Coffee okay?"

"It's good," she said after she'd just taken a sip. "It hits the spot. I'm glad I've got tomorrow off as I'm going to need to go to bed early tonight."

"You never said if you had any plans which is why I woke you up."

She was wondering if he wanted her to leave until he said he was hungry and was going to make breakfast, but she wasn't going to assume she was staying here all day either. That would go against their rules of keeping this a simple booty call.

Though there was nothing simple about what they did last night. She was still a little sore this morning, but no way she

was going to complain about it either.

“No plans,” she said. “I had my fill of my family last week. How about you? I can leave right after breakfast, no worries.”

“I have no plans,” he said. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you want.”

It was the grin on his face that had her walking over and leaning up on her toes to kiss him. “So you can have your hands on me again.”

“If you’re willing, then yes,” he said.

“I’m more than willing. And if you want, since you’re cooking me breakfast, if you’ve got anything in your house for me to make us for lunch I can do that for you. Might as well give you something back for what you’re giving me.”

He took the cup out of her hand and lifted her up so that she wrapped her legs around his waist again. “You are giving me plenty, but if you want to stay and cook me dinner I wouldn’t turn that down either.”

She wasn’t going to comment that he changed her lunch to dinner and that would keep her here longer.

She’d sort this all out in her head tomorrow, but today, she was just going to enjoy what she had.



“WE’VE GOT NEWS,” Diane said into the phone. Grant watched as she put it on speaker. They’d just left his brother’s house after a New Year’s Day dinner.

“Don’t tell me that Julia is engaged,” Jolene, the wife of his older brother Gavin, said.

“She is,” Grant said, laughing. “Did we beat you to it with Ivan?”

“Yes,” Jolene said. He could tell his sister-in-law was put out by that too. “I swear that nephew of mine is doing everything on purpose to ruffle my feathers. I thought for sure he’d propose at Christmas to Kendra, but nope. Then last night and even today, but again, nothing.”

“He’s probably continuing to yank your chain,” his wife said.

“I’m sure. You guys did a really good job on this one,” Jolene said.

“There is some tongue and cheek there and you know it,” he said.

“You give her hell,” Gavin said, joining the conversation. “My wife seems to think she has a monopoly on getting people set up.”

“Not this time,” Grant said. “And I’m going to brag because I know I had a bigger hand in it this time. I was there for Flynn when he needed it the most.”

Diane sighed. She’d already yelled at him for rubbing everyone’s face in this for months since he was at Flynn’s office when he’d found out Allen Martin had passed and given Flynn advice. “You’re never going to get tired of saying that, are you?”

“No, I’m not,” he said, puffing his chest out more. “You women think you are controlling it all, but we can help out too.”

He had to tell himself that after he was afraid he might have caused issues with Megan and Jonah. Normally Garrett was the one with the loose lips. He tried to redeem himself by hunting down Royce and Chloe but got nowhere with them either.

“We’ll let you go with this one since things do seem to be going well with Flynn and Julia. And today Flynn said he’d been talking to his siblings a bit more and even Rachel is going to meet them at some point. She was more excited than anyone about the engagement. She came into the party with them because Flynn was afraid she’d announce it before he got there.”

“She’s just excited,” Jolene said. “It should make you feel good about the work we do. So who is next for you guys?”

“I’m still working on Jonah and, well, Grant and Garrett are doing it too. It’s their employee,” Diane said.

“That’s right,” Grant said. “My employee, and Garrett, and I have got this one under control.”

Diane nudged him with her foot and laughed. He’d confessed last night what he’d slipped and said and how Jonah seemed shocked and then not really thrilled. He might have to do some damage control for Megan this week, if he only knew how. Jolene snorted on the other line. “Well then, you’ll have to show us what you’ve got. In the meantime, Happy New Year and may we get an engagement out of Ivan soon. That boy is probably clutching his wallet closed and doesn’t want to buy the ring.”

“He’ll open it up if it’s right,” Diane said. “Just remember that.”

“I will. And I’ll keep you posted,” Jolene said.

They hung up a few minutes later. “That was fun,” Diane said. “And I’m thrilled for Flynn and Julia. I know Carolyn wanted to talk to Jolene, but she lost her voice yelling over all the excitement today.”

“She does have more babies to get excited about, then the engagement. Life is turning out better than we ever hoped, isn’t it?”

Who would have thought his nephew Wyatt and niece Jade would both announce pregnancies yesterday. The funny part was those twins didn’t even know the other was doing it.

“It sure is,” he said. Fingers crossed it was for Megan and Jonah though. “In the meantime, what do you think is going on with Chloe and Royce?”

His wife sighed. “I can’t get a read on them, and as much as it pains me to say this, I guess you and Garrett need to put more work into it too. I don’t like not having a hand in it much.”

“Get over it,” he said. “We know what we are doing.” At least he and his brother thought that at one point last night, but today he wasn’t so sure when he replayed some of the night in his head again.

“And that is why you’re feeling so guilty about what you said to Jonah last night, right? Because you’ve got such a good handle on it?”

He sighed. “Hey, Garrett and I are a work in progress.”

She leaned over and kissed him. “You are. My work in progress.”

STICK TO THE TRUTH

““**M**orning,” Elise said to Royce when he walked into the office on Tuesday.

“Morning,” he said, walking past his sister’s office to go into his. He figured she’d be here early like him. Most of the other staff weren’t in yet, including his father.

“Did you have a good time at the party on Saturday night?”

“I did,” he said. “What about you with your friends?”

“It was nice,” Elise said. “Since I was driving I didn’t drink much. Just had two glasses of wine early on and then stuck to soda. I was surprised you went to the Fierces’ this year.”

He wasn’t sure why his sister was. “Why? They’ve asked for years and you don’t go and neither does Dad.”

“That’s right, but you went this year. Was there a reason why?”

“Because this year we are a partner with them and not just clients. It’s a different relationship. One of us should have gone and since you two had plans and I didn’t it wasn’t that hard to suck it up.”

“Hmm,” Elise said. “You’re not one to stay and hang out with people you don’t know.”

“I know a lot of them there and you know that,” he said. He had no clue where she was going with this unless she was aware of what their father was doing with the Fierces too.

Nah. Elise wouldn’t approve of being set up herself and she’d stick up for him.

“True. What did you do the past few days?”

“Wow, you’re awfully nosy. What do you think I did? It’s what I normally do when I have a day off.”

Yesterday he’d done laundry and watched sports, had a beer and fought the urge to not text Chloe.

The last one was the only different thing on a day off.

Sunday, the holiday, he’d managed to talk Chloe into staying after breakfast. They’d watched sports and he found she was just as into college football as he was.

For lunch they had sandwiches and chips. For dinner she found chicken in his freezer and baked it with some roasted potatoes with leftover bacon mixed in and a bag of mixed veggies that he wasn’t sure how they got in his freezer.

Not that he didn’t like vegetables, but he didn’t normally buy them either though he must have. Could be he grabbed them by mistake one week.

They talked while she cooked and he learned more about her than he thought he would. The friends part of the arrangement.

They exchanged college stories and friends and he found that they had a lot of the same tastes in music and TV.

But once dinner was cleaned up, she was yawning and he knew she was beat and was slightly shocked she'd stayed as long as she had.

She went on her way and they hadn't talked again.

"You normally have guests over on a holiday?" Elise asked him.

Shit. "What?" he asked.

"I drove by your house. I was going to stop and say hi. I don't know. I was bored and just didn't want to spend the day by myself. I ended up going to see Dad once I saw a car in your driveway."

"Did you tell Dad I had someone over?"

Elise grinned. "No. Is it a secret? Is it a woman?"

There was no way out of this. Well, there was. He could lie. Or he could stick to the truth and let her draw her own conclusions. "I had a friend over and we watched football, had a beer and some sandwiches and snacks."

Elise's grin dropped. "Oh. Guess it's not a woman then."

Damn, that was easier than he thought it'd be. He couldn't wait to tell Chloe. When he talked to her again and who knew when that would be.

"What did you and Dad do?" he asked.

"Nothing. He was watching football too. I wasn't that interested in it so I just left and went home. I was tired anyway from the night before."

"Why didn't you want to be alone?" he asked. "You like being alone. You could have gone to see Mom."

“Hell no,” Elise said. “I’m good for a year or more. We both are. I don’t know. Sometimes it’s just boring being home alone. If it was a normal Sunday I don’t think I’d care, but it wasn’t. Most stores were closed and there wasn’t anything on TV. It was like this reminder I was a loser by myself when other people were visiting. Even you had a friend over.”

He never remembered Elise being this way before but didn’t know if he had the mental energy to deal with it or her either.

“You two are here early,” his father said, moving past his office. So much for coming in early to get work done.

“I was just talking to Royce about me being the loser by myself on Sunday. He was with one of his buddies watching football and drinking beer.”

It wasn’t really the truth but could be. If his father and sister wanted to assume the buddy was a male, more power to them.

“I told your sister she isn’t a loser. My door is always open. Speaking of being with people, how did the party go on Saturday night?”

“I’m going to work,” Elise said. “I heard this already.”

“Really?” his father asked. “What was there to hear?”

“Not much,” he said. “Elise was shocked I went alone as if I can’t handle socializing with people I know.”

“She doesn’t get it,” his father said. “It’s different for guys. You knew more than enough people there I’m sure.”

“I did,” he said. “It was fine. I talked with a bunch of people and moved around then a few minutes after midnight got out of there with everyone else.”

“I’m surprised you stayed as long as you did,” his father said, lifting an eyebrow.

“The food was good,” he said.

His father laughed. “I’m sure it was. When you get settled why don’t you come into my office? There are a bunch of things I want to go over with you before you head to the sites.”

“Sure,” he said. “Want to give me a heads up so I’m prepared?”

“Just the status of some of the companies at the commercial building. Grant reached out to me last week to call him on Tuesday. I believe they’ve got another potential renter and he was going to talk to the Olsons this weekend. I’m glad it’s on their end to get that fleshed out before it gets to us.”

“Me too,” he said. But more rentals would mean more engineering services and maybe Chloe would be assigned to it and this would put them in each other’s space again without needing an excuse to see her.



“DID you get a chance to talk to Royce this morning?” Grant asked Richard. “I’ve got Garrett in here too on speaker phone.”

“I saw him and Elise talking when I came in. I asked how the party went and he said he left right after midnight. I didn’t get much more out of him other than saying I’m surprised he stayed as long as he had.”

“What was his response?” Garrett asked.

“That the food was good,” he said, laughing. That was typical of his son.

“It was good,” Grant said. “I’m trying, Richard. I really am. I refuse to give up, but Royce and Chloe didn’t talk all that much that I could see at the party. On top of that, our kids know what we are doing and with whom and they were in both Chloe and Royce’s ear.”

“That’s not good,” he said. “Does my son know I’m part of this?”

“No clue,” Grant said. “I’m not about to ask or bring it up, are you?”

“No way,” he said. “But you’re telling me they didn’t talk that much and he left at midnight. Then Elise just commented in front of Royce in regards to him having a buddy over for football and beer on Sunday.”

There was a loud collective sigh on the other end. “I don’t get it,” Garrett said. “They seem perfect for each other and I’m not sure how to get them to see it.”

“Maybe part of the problem is Chloe does know it and is fighting it?” Richard asked.

“She is doing that,” Grant said. “She knows too. Our kids are pretty vocal about it.”

“Do you think she’d be more willing if you backed off or said you didn’t know what you were thinking? That there was no way they would get along?” he asked.

“Like reverse psychology?” Garrett asked. “We haven’t tried that yet. It might work.”

“I’m willing to give anything a try,” Grant said. “But to keep this call legit, I did talk to Robert at the party briefly. He stopped over and said they do have someone interested in the other half of the first floor. They’d like to see the space first

and talk with you guys and get an idea of what can be done and the cost before they commit.”

“Let me know a time to meet and Royce and I will be there. Or just Royce. Maybe I’ll send Elise with him too. She is pretty good on the costs and mentioned that sometimes she can walk through and start building the costs as they talk while she takes notes rather than waiting for Royce to get back to her. He’ll have to figure out the labor, but Elise will be doing all the ordering anyway.”

“If you think that will make it go faster, we’ll defer to you,” Grant said.

“Yeah. And while you’re at it, you can get a feel for my youngest. At this rate maybe you should shift gears and see if you know anyone for her. Royce might be a lost cause.”

The brothers both laughed. “We can do that too if you want,” Garrett said.

“Just keep my name out of it, if you can.”

He hung up shortly after and got ready for his meeting with his son.

Royce walked in. “What are you shaking your head about?”

“What?” he asked.

“You’re shaking your head and sitting here by yourself. Something I need to know about?”

“Sorry. I was just on the phone with Grant and Garrett. They were talking about his kids and grandkids. I was shaking my head over the fact both of my kids are lost causes and told them that.”

“I’m surprised they didn’t offer to help find us someone,” Royce said, smirking at him. “Everyone knows they love matching people up.”

“That is where the head shaking came from. I told them God no. It’d never happen. My kids wouldn’t fall for it and would want nothing to do with it.”

“That’s right,” Royce said. “On both cases.”

Royce sat down and he got to work. Richard didn’t get much of a reaction out of that statement. Maybe his son really was a lost cause.

LIGHT AND FUN

““**W**hy do you seem so down today?” Chloe asked Megan when she saw her at the coffee machine on Tuesday morning.

She needed the extra dose to get through the day.

Sunday night she'd slept like a baby between the little sleep the night before and the calories she'd burned with Royce.

There was no way she thought she'd spend the whole day with him on Sunday and even had a great time doing it.

They cooked and talked and watched football.

The two of them had more fun than she thought they'd have together.

When this idea first came into her head it was more for a sexual release so she didn't have to worry about how to spend time with a man. One that might not like the same things as her.

She was finding she and Royce did have a lot in common though.

Megan looked around and then said quietly, “In your office.”

“Sounds serious,” she said and got her coffee with Megan and then moved to her office. “What’s going on?”

“I just got done talking to Raina and I’m still down. Jonah and I got into a fight on New Year’s Eve and I haven’t talked to him since.”

“Oh no,” she said. “I noticed there was some tension between you two. Did something happen at the party?”

She was so busy trying to keep her own ruse up that she didn’t notice that maybe one of her friends needed her.

“Not really. Or it was stupid. You know how I asked Grant and Garrett for help with Jonah, right? More like advice and not really help and that was just early on. I mean Jonah and I were already tiptoeing around each other on our own.”

“Yep,” she said. “I know all about it. I still think it was ballsy to ask them, but it worked.”

“It was working,” Megan said. “Jonah even knew the Fierces were trying to set us up and that his own mother was part of it.”

“Really?” she asked. “I hadn’t heard that part. So what is the problem?”

“On Saturday night, Grant slipped and said how I got help from them. I don’t think it was help as much as they gave me suggestions. Some I took and some I didn’t.”

“And Jonah didn’t know?” she asked.

“No. It wasn’t that big of a deal.”

“Like what suggestions?” she asked.

“Early on I was ready to give up getting his attention and they said I should try steering the bull in another direction.”

“Sounds innocent enough,” she said.

“So I went to his gym to work out knowing he’d probably see me. It’s not like they said to do that.”

“As I said, innocent enough. I’m surprised Jonah is upset over it. Did you fight?”

“We did. He was upset and felt like I withheld that from him. Then he was doubting my love. Like they somehow control my feelings for him and without their help I wouldn’t have made the move.”

“That’s crazy,” she said.

“I thought so too. We got back to his place on Saturday night and he was pissed. I got mad back the next morning when he’d said he’d calmed down enough to talk. He wouldn’t see reason and my temper got the best of me and I left. I mean why stay if we were fighting and he wasn’t even acting like he wanted to talk about it.”

She cringed. These were the things that made her realize she was glad she wasn’t in a relationship and keeping it light and fun with Royce was totally the way to go.

“Sometimes people need time to cool off,” Chloe said. “I’m not sure how I’d be in that situation.”

“I shouldn’t have left, but I haven’t talked to him since. Raina came in to see how ticked off her brother was and then she said that sometimes Jonah just needs time to think things through. He’s not a hothead, but he didn’t want to talk when I did.”

“Yeah, one of those things you might have to figure out. Or how to work it out.”

“You’re not much help,” Megan said, laughing.

“I didn’t know I was supposed to help you,” she said, smiling. “I’m sorry things are rough, but I don’t have any advice. Raina knows her brother best. I just know what you’re telling me. Seems you are both at fault here for the reactions.”

“We are,” Megan said. “I guess I don’t need help or advice. Maybe I just need someone to make me laugh. You’re good at that. It’s not like you were getting any action on New Year’s Eve. I don’t think you and Royce were close enough to each other for more than ten minutes. It’s driving the Fierces nuts.”

Then their plan was working. “I’m not trying to drive anyone nuts,” she said. “Just doing my own thing like always.”

“That’s true. That is what I admire about you. You always do what you want and for years I’ve been trying to please my family and everyone else. It’s nice to not feel like I’ve got to do that anymore.”

She knew that Megan’s parents compared her to her older sisters. They told her the type of man she needed to settle down with and with every man of that type Megan met it never worked out.

Chloe wasn’t sure why everyone felt they knew what was best for someone else all the time.

“See,” she said. “You need to be more like me. Don’t care about what other people want and think.”

“True,” Megan said. “And it did make me laugh. Thanks. I’ll let you get back to work.”

She got right to what was on her desk and continued that way for hours. There was part of her that wanted to text Royce but said, nope. That would be crossing the line and the last

thing she wanted was the expectation that she had to be in touch with someone daily or they had to be with her.

After lunch there was a knock on her door and she glanced up to see Grant standing there. She was surprised someone hadn't come to seek her out before now and try to plant some seeds.

"Afternoon, Grant. What can I do for you?"

"I've spent most of my morning on the phone and wanted to let you know that the first floor of the commercial building might have a potential renter. They want to move fast and are meeting with Kennedy Construction this week. We should have another project, fingers crossed."

"Wonderful," she said.

"Also, I'm not sure if you heard, but Raina's brother, Jonah, got in a car accident this morning. Raina and Megan are at the hospital with him, but Ryder just let me know that they are going to discharge Jonah soon."

"Is he okay?"

"He should be. He's got a concussion and some bruised ribs but overall should recover."

"I'm glad. I'll reach out to Megan and Raina later. Thanks for telling me."

"I assumed you might not have known."

"No. I was talking to Megan earlier so it had to be before the accident."

"I'm sure. You guys are all close. I love that there are so many complex relationships here in the office."

"There are," she said. "It's a great place to work."

“It is,” Grant said. “And I want you to always think that way. I’m sorry if my brother or I are coming off too strong in trying to find someone for you. You know we are just having fun.”

This was interesting. “I do know that,” she said.

“But we realized that you’ve been very clear in that you aren’t interested and it’s wrong of us to not honor that.”

“Thank you,” she said, grinning. She was waiting for the catch. No way they were walking away. They were too sneaky for that.

“I know you are probably hearing that we thought you and Royce would make a good match.”

“I did hear that,” she said.

Grant looked a little sheepish. “Our bad. You know there is no science to this. He’s a great guy and with good values just like you. You work well together, but it’s clear as day that neither one of you is interested in the other. Not sure what we were thinking. It’d never work anyway.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” she said, holding back her laugh. Her smile was still in place. Did they really think she’d fall for this? No way she was going to look disappointed and give them something to push more.

“You don’t think so either?” Grant asked.

“Nope. He’s a nice guy and all, but coworkers is about all it’d be. I know you two mean well, but some things can’t work if the people don’t want them to.”

Grant sighed. “You’re right. We know that now. I’ll let you get back to work. If I get an update on Jonah I’ll let you know, but I’m sure you’ll talk to one of those girls later.”

“Thanks,” she said. “If I hear anything I’ll let you know too.”

The minute Grant was out of her office she got up and shut the door and started to laugh.

She wanted to call Royce and give him a heads up on how they seemed to be frustrating everyone but knew he’d be busy.

There was no reason she shouldn’t send him a text though.

She pulled her phone out. *New tactic on the Fierce side. I’ll fill you in at some point.*

There. That wasn’t so bad. It’s not like she said he had to reach out to her soon.

It wasn’t five minutes later her phone went off with Royce’s reply: *Reverse psychology. I got it from my father too. Really? Do they think we are that naive?*

She laughed even harder. *Obviously*, she typed back.

This is more fun than I thought it’d be. On more than one front.

Okay, now that got her heart racing again. *The same*, she replied and then put her phone down. It was best if they let it end now.

If it was best, then why was she disappointed when he didn’t reply back?

THEIR AGREEMENT

It'd been almost three weeks since he'd spent a wonderful night and day with Chloe.

During that time they'd texted every few days. Some of it was work related, other times like friends would.

If he was feeling horny and wanting to spend time with her, he'd been almost afraid to ask or bring it up. Which was stupid since it was their agreement, yet for now he seemed to be playing it safe.

He wondered if she wasn't as needy as him or could be doing the same thing.

But she was coming to his office today at lunch for them to sit down and hammer out some of the designs for the new tenants.

Elise and he had met with the owners two weeks ago and walked them through the property with Garrett and Grant. They heard what the new clients wanted and explained that they were finishing up an entire floor now and working on another one at the same time. They wouldn't start this one until those two were done.

He was stretched thin as it was. Kennedy Construction wasn't putting all their eggs in one basket because once this

commercial building was filled their work would be maintenance only for years since most of the companies were signing at least five-year leases with options for five more.

That meant he couldn't push off other business that built their company.

And with work being this crazy, he was telling himself he didn't have time for Chloe either for more than sex. Then he felt guilty for having those thoughts.

Which was why she was coming here for lunch and then they made plans to have dinner at his place later tonight.

Both of them had been beating around the bush until she cracked a joke about it being three weeks and he said something back and somehow they both got to this point.

Worked for him, no matter how it came about.

They'd gone back and forth on where to meet. At Fierce Engineering where there would be a lot of eyes on them or here where it'd only be his father.

Since the Fierces and his father changed their tactic, he and Chloe had been even more private about their conversations. When they were together they made it more professional and almost aloof.

They'd both witnessed the Fierces frowning when they'd seen it and then he and Chloe would have a great laugh over it later that night texting. You know...like friends would do.

"Royce," he heard over his phone. "Chloe Grey is here from Fierce Engineering. Do you want me to send her to the conference room or your office?"

"Direct her to my office," he said to the secretary. Might as well let her see where he worked since he'd seen her office.

He looked up when he heard her voice and saw her turn the corner and walk in. She was smirking at him and he desperately wanted to pull her into his arms and crush his mouth to hers.

Since when had he ever felt a need this great?

“I’m glad you could take the time out of your schedule to meet here.”

“Not a problem,” she said primly. “We need to get this done and it’s better to do it this way rather than going back and forth over emails and calls. It seems this client is going to be a little difficult?”

He smiled. “That is Elise’s feeling too. They’ve got their office manager picking out colors and flooring and finishes and she can’t make up her mind. But for you, you don’t need to worry too much about that.”

“No,” she said. “As long as they don’t change their mind on the layout.”

“Yes,” he said. “That would be your problem then.”

“It’s not a problem if they do change it,” she said. “They are a paying client.”

“That’s right, Royce,” his father said, coming into his office. “You should listen to Chloe on this. The client is always right.”

“Not always,” he grumbled.

“It’s nice to see you again, Chloe,” his father said. “Grant told me you were going to spend some time here with Royce to get this going during lunch.”

“I am,” she said. “I’ve been busy and we need to make time for this so it was best to do it in person rather than the

constant back and forth of emails.”

“I tell Royce all the time it’s better to meet in person, but he isn’t one for doing that. I’m glad this worked out and hope it’s not out of your way.”

“No,” she said. “I don’t live that far from here so I’ll just go home and finish up work from there when we are done.”

“Hopefully my son isn’t too difficult and can get you out of here at a decent time to start your weekend.”

“That would be great,” she said.

“Oh,” Royce said. “Do you have plans?”

He figured it was too good to resist this. “I do actually. I’m going to dinner with someone tonight.”

His father’s smile fell. “A female friend?” his father asked.

“Dad, that is none of your business,” he said.

“No,” she said. “And if you don’t mind, maybe we can get started.”

“Sure,” Royce said and got up with his computer and moved past his father to show Chloe to the conference room.

When they got to the conference room, Chloe took a seat and opened her computer and started to type. He felt his phone go off in his pocket and pulled it out to read a text from her telling him that was both awful and hilarious at the same time.

He laughed and put his phone away and then winked at her. No reason to respond. That might be too risky to do.

“Elise is going to order lunch to be delivered. What would you like?”

“Anything easy is good for me,” she said. “Whatever.”

“Sandwiches? Turkey and provolone?” he asked her and then wished he could have taken back the fact that he knew she ate that when she was at his house weeks ago.

“Sure,” she said, smiling at him.

He got up and went to the secretary and told her what to order and to see if Elise or his father wanted anything and then returned to get to work.

“Sorry,” he said, wincing about the sandwich comment.

“Don’t be,” she said quietly.

They got to work and their sandwiches were delivered forty minutes later, with Elise coming in to join them.

“Hi,” Elise said. “Mind if I join you two so I can make sure we are on the same page with the size of some of the things they said they want?”

“Sure,” he said. “Have you met Chloe yet?”

“We met when she came in,” Elise said. Elise pulled open her computer. “Why don’t we eat first and just chat.”

“That works,” Chloe said.

He sat back while Elise and Chloe talked more than anything. It was about work and nothing more. A few comments were thrown in about the New Year’s Eve party that she’d heard was fun and that next year she was going to try to go.

Chloe encouraged his sister to do it, but nothing else was said.

When the three of them were done with their lunch, they went back to their work and three hours later had everything fleshed out enough for Chloe to get started.

“I should have this done by the end of the week for Grant’s approval. I’m going to make it a priority,” Chloe said. “I know it’s going to take time to order your supplies and get things set on your end, but we need the plans approved first.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Don’t rush too much, as I can only move so fast anyway.”

“It’s better to have it done and get to it when we can,” Elise said. “We know that.”

“You’re right,” he said to his sister.

“Did you hear that, Chloe? I’ve got witnesses. My brother told me I was right.”

Chloe laughed. “I do that with my brother, Dane, too. It’s a sister thing.”

“How are things going in here?” his father asked when he came in.

“Just finishing up now,” he said. “Remember, Chloe said she has plans so we can get her out of here to get ready for them.”

“Thank you for that,” she said. “But I’ve got plenty of time still.”

It was just after three at this point. He was going to try to get out around four since he’d spent the whole day in the office. His father was out running to the sites, telling him he’d cover for him.

He knew it was because his father wanted him and Chloe to spend the afternoon together and he wasn’t going to argue about it.

“Hopefully he’s accommodating for you if you are late,” Royce said.

“I’m sure he will be,” she said, nodding her head. Not even cracking a smile and keeping it professional. His father frowned. Damn, she was good at this.

“Then I think we are set,” he said and stood up with her.

“I’ll walk you out,” Elise said. There was nothing he could say so he let his sister do that and then went back to his office to finish up and get the hell out of there.

Chloe was going to pick up pizza and bring it to his house. They hadn’t even talked about if she was staying the night and he didn’t want to bring it up.

He’d be happy if she did, but to him, it was still one of those things he’d rather just let happen right now.

He looked up when his door shut to see his sister standing there with her arms crossed. “You’re such a jerk.”

“What?” he asked. He had no idea what this was about. He was completely professional the entire time Chloe was here.

“Chloe,” Elise said. “You’re her date tonight and you’re playing some game and I want to know what it is and why?”

“What are you talking about?” he said, keeping his face straight. How the hell could she have figured this out? No way.

“Royce. I drove by your house on New Year’s Eve. I saw the car in your driveway, remember? I just walked Chloe out and was standing up there talking to Stephanie when I saw Chloe pull out. I’m not sure why I even noticed, but I did and then I realized it was the same car because it had a Clemson sticker in the back window.

Oh shit, how could he have forgotten about that?

“You think that is the only black Honda with a Clemson sticker in the back window?”

“And you know the color and the kind of car she drives,” Elise said, putting her hands on her hips.

Son of a bitch. He was trapped and had no way out. His sister was half his size, but damn when she was wound up there was no way to get past her. She was meaner than a defensive lineman and he was the running back with the football and being charged.

“Lower your voice,” he said.

“Tell me what is going on. Why is this a secret and what was that game you were playing?”

“You need to swear to secrecy,” he said. “Or I’m not saying a word about anything.”

“Fine. I do. I’m trying to understand what is going on unless you just don’t want her bosses to be worried this is a conflict.”

“No,” he said. “If her bosses found out they’d be jumping for joy along with Dad.”

Elise’s eyes bugged out of her head. “Oh my God. Are the Fierces trying to set you two up and you know it?”

“Yes,” he said. “We found out back in November. I guess she’s known for a while, but I didn’t. She told me. Then I realized Dad was in on it.”

“No way,” Elise said. “Dad wouldn’t.”

“Really? Because I can tell you what he’s done so far.”

He filled her in on the day the plans were missing when he showed up. Then Chloe showed up without him knowing. The conversations on New Year’s Eve and then the change in tactics.

“Urgh! I never thought Dad would do that. Why?” she almost screeched.

“Lower your voice. And don’t think your name hasn’t come up because I can assure you it has.”

He told her about the latest conversation. “Never going to happen,” she said firmly. “Yet you’re falling for it.”

“No,” he said. “We aren’t. It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it like?” his sister asked.

“Does it matter? I don’t want you to think ill of Chloe.”

Elise frowned and then laughed. “You asshole. Are you just using her for sex?”

That made him feel like a spider on the floor that his sister was going to step on any minute. “No one is using anyone else. She has her reasons and I have mine. It’s working for us. I don’t want to be pushed into something any more than you do and neither does Chloe. So keep it quiet or I’ll throw your name in the hat every time I see Grant and Garrett.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Elise said.

“Try me,” he said.

He held her stare. “This is worse than when you had the controller to my video games and were going to take it all apart on me knowing I would never be able to put it back together.”

“That’s right. You know I’m serious.”

“Fine,” Elise said. “I’ll have your back on this. But if I think you’re lying to me about Dad, then all bets are off.”

“I’m not,” he said. “Trust me. I’ll prove it right now.”

“What are you going to do?”

He called his father to his office and told Elise to open the door.

His father walked in. “How did it go with Chloe?”

“It went well,” he said. “She is going to start working on it next week and we’ll get it done and then she can be free of me for a while.”

His father frowned and he saw his sister make the same move as if it was catching her notice that there would be no reason for their father to react that way. “That’s too bad,” his father said. “She’s such a nice young woman. She’d be a good catch for someone. Not you though. Too bad you two aren’t right for each other.”

“How would you know if they were right for each other?” Elise asked their father.

“What?” his father said. “I don’t know. Just guessing. You know that Royce spends way too much time at work and a woman like Chloe probably needs someone around more.”

“If you say so, Dad,” Elise said. The minute their father was out of the office he looked at his sister. “This sucks. I better not be next.”

“You’ve been warned so you better keep your mouth shut if you know what’s good for you. Now I’ve got to let Chloe know you are aware.”

“So I can talk to her about it?” Elise asked.

“No. Just because you know doesn’t give you free license to talk about this. I don’t want anyone getting wind of it.”

“It didn’t take long for me to, so you better keep that in mind.”

He didn’t need the reminder.

A MASSIVE MISTAKE

““**W**hat do you mean your sister knows about our arrangement?” Chloe all but shouted when he’d broken the news to her an hour later.

She’d been shocked that Royce had texted her he was home so early and figured that he was just eager to see her again. She knew she was eager herself and was shocked it’d been almost three weeks since she’d been here.

But neither one of them seemed to be making the step and this lunch meeting today was as good of an excuse for them to dance around the bush again and work it out.

Now she was positive it was a massive mistake.

“It’s not my fault,” he said. “Elise recognized your car.”

Chloe dropped the pizza box on the counter in the kitchen and swirled around and put her hands on her hips. “How was she able to do that?”

He shrugged. “She drove by my house on New Year’s Day. She was lonely and was going to come visit and saw your car there. I didn’t tell her who was here. I said I had a friend over and watched football and had sandwiches and beer.”

“Which wasn’t a lie,” she said slowly.

“That’s right. She drew the conclusion it was a buddy of mine. She even told my father I wasn’t alone that day but referred to you as being a guy and I let it go. She said buddy, not man. Again, not a lie.”

“And you didn’t think to inform me of this?” she asked. She wasn’t scowling as much, but she was still pissed.

“It didn’t seem all that important,” he said. “At that time.”

“Well, we know it is,” she said. “I wouldn’t have agreed to go over if that was the case. Women think of these things. I would have worried someone would have noticed my car if I knew someone saw it at your house.”

“My mind doesn’t go there. I’m not used to sneaking around.”

Her hands went from her hips and crossed in front of her chest. Here she’d run home and put on some more sexy clothes like last time that he didn’t get to appreciate and now no one was going to see them.

“So I’m used to sneaking around?” she asked. “Because I’m the one that brought this up to begin with and I’m the devious one because I’m smart enough to know people are watching us?”

“No,” he said, running his hands through his hair. He was frustrated, she could see, but so was she.

What must his sister think of her? This was a nightmare she was trying to avoid.

“Then what?” she asked. “Why did you say that?”

“You’re taking this out of context. This is just as new to me as it is to you. I had no clue and didn’t think much of it. I thought things were going great and working out the way we

wanted. I had no idea my sister would have noticed that. Who the hell pays that much attention to things?”

“Women,” she snapped. “Obviously not men.”

“So noted,” he said. “I’m sorry. I swore her to secrecy. You can trust her. Believe me. She was shocked to hear what was going on with the Fierces and that my father would do this. She didn’t believe he would.”

“Did you convince her?”

“I did. I told her if she opened her mouth, she’d be next. I’d make sure I dropped her name nonstop in front of Grant and Garrett.”

Chloe smiled when he’d said that. “That’s mean and dirty. I kind of like it. Go on.”

Her arms dropped down, some of her anger diminishing. They had to figure this out.

Or not. They were just friends that hopped in bed once. They were planning on it again tonight, but that didn’t mean it had to happen.

Was she such a horrible person that she still wanted it to happen though?

“I had to prove it to her. I called my father into my office and she witnessed it.” He explained what happened. “When my father left she was swearing and said our father better not dare. I said then she should remember that she was warned.”

“She probably thinks I’m some kind of slut,” she said quietly.

“No,” he said. “She doesn’t. She won’t and wouldn’t. I told her you have your reasons and I have mine and they are of no concern to her. She is good about letting people live their

own lives. I told you what it was like with our mother. I think she's more annoyed that she didn't see this with our father and now has to worry that she might be next."

Chloe walked over to his cabinet and grabbed the plates down. Might as well eat before the pizza got cold. "Now what?" she asked.

"I'm forgiven?" he asked, taking the plate out of her hand.

"I didn't know I had to forgive you for anything. Or that you cared."

He frowned. "Well, we had plans tonight. I was kind of looking forward to it."

She snorted. "Me too, which is why I'm letting this slide. If you can trust your sister then I've got to believe you. I don't have a choice."

"We all have choices in life," he said.

"We do, but the one I want is not to leave here without you seeing what I've got under my clothes."

She took a seductive bite of the pizza and winked at him.



ROYCE STOPPED the bite of the pizza that was going to his mouth. "Fuck the food," he said. "You're just pure evil."

She laughed. "You like it and you know it. That is why you are groveling over the knowledge your sister has."

"I'm not sure I'd use the word grovel," he said. The last thing he wanted was to be thought of as a wuss, but he really did feel bad that Elise found out and it was his fault.

He probably should have told her and only had his ignorance to blame for not thinking...like a woman as she'd said.

When she was pissed over that comment, he thought he'd get on his knees to get her to believe he didn't mean any harm.

The last thing he'd want to do was insult or hurt her. Ever.

So yeah, kind of groveling now that he thought of it.

"Poor choice of words. Emotions are heightened right now," she said

He dropped his slice of pie back in the box and took hers out of her hand. "Yes, they are. So food is waiting."

"Maybe I'm hungry," she said, laughing.

"I am too," he said, "but not for food."

He picked her up, cradling her this time, then carried her to his room, his mouth on hers, her arms around his neck.

When he got to his room he put her on the bed softly. More gently than he was feeling, but he'd all but attacked her the first time they'd had sex and he'd told himself he wasn't going to do it tonight no matter how much the beast was clawing to come out.

His hands went to her shirt and lifted it over her head. She had on white lace that wasn't a bra but more like a body suit that went into her jeans. "Jesus," he said.

She was grinning at him, her eyes laughing and smoky. She was as turned on as he was.

Her hands went to the button on her jeans, undid them. She wiggled out of them and he got to see the one-piece she was

wearing.

Pretty much see-through with two snaps between her legs. Oh yeah, they were coming undone.

He wasted no time taking care of that and then sliding down, his mouth moving to her heat, his tongue coming out and licking up the length of her.

She let out a low moan and he did it again.

“You like that, don’t you?”

“Shut up and keep doing it,” she said.

He could follow directions well. No way he was going to risk ticking her off again when she was on his bed and came prepared for him to see her all sexy like this.

His hands slid under her hips, his mouth getting close and devouring her. There was no way he’d ever get enough of this.

Her legs moved up and went on his shoulders. He wasn’t sure he’d ever been with someone so free with their body like Chloe was and he hoped he never got tired of it. No way, he couldn’t and the thought that this was only temporary wasn’t sitting well with him.

Those thoughts just made him work harder at her. He wanted her screaming out his name.

His mouth settled on her swollen bud, two fingers thrust inside of her, and she bucked up more until she crossed her ankles behind his shoulders opening her up wider and letting him have full access to bring her to an orgasm.

He curled his fingers and was thrusting them in and out, his mouth sucking harder. The noises in the room were animalistic at best, primal at worst.

She was jerking up and pushing him to do more and he wanted to give her what she wanted.

When he felt her muscles start to flex around his fingers and her moans getting louder, he refused to stop until she told him she wanted him to.

Her legs dropped down a minute later and her body going lax was enough for him to realize she might have had enough.

“Now am I forgiven?” he asked.

She opened her eyes and looked at him and the heat and smoke were gone and something else was in their place. Something he couldn't pinpoint and wasn't sure he wanted to.

She reached out and grabbed his shirtfront and tugged him up and then turned him so that he was on his back and she was over him. Her white little lace bodysuit was still on and looking sexy as ever, but it was open between her legs and flapping around.

Her hands were moving on the button of his jeans now until she was tugging them down and off. He lifted his shirt off and was going to roll and get a condom, but she stopped him when her hand wrapped around him.

“Payback time and then you'll know if you're forgiven.”

Her mouth lowered and his eyes closed knowing it was his time to let himself lose control.

He wasn't sure what she was doing, but it was something he'd never felt before.

Her hand was moving up and down, both of them. Her lips doing the same, then settling on his tip, the skin the most sensitive there, her teeth grazing him.

He jerked up a bit when she did that so she did it again. She didn't ask if it felt good or hurt, it's like she knew what he needed and wanted without words.

Like he had with her too.

Maybe he'd never been this in tune with someone else before. He had no clue, but that could be why it felt so wonderful.

Her mouth was moving over him again now, then stopping at the tip with her tongue coming out to lick around. She had a routine and a rhythm that she was playing now and he was losing fast.

"I don't have much left in me," he said. Might as well give her a warning at the very least.

"Good," she said. "My jaw is getting tired."

He thought that meant she was ready to stop, but instead she turned it up even more to the point he knew he was going to explode.

He went to move her off and she shook her head so he stopped and let her do her thing until he literally had nothing left in him, filling her mouth up. She didn't swallow but rather spit it out on his stomach. He didn't even care.

"Sorry about that," she said. "Didn't want it to get on your bed. Thought I could swallow, but it didn't work that way."

"No worries," he said.

"I've never done it before and now I know why. It's more than I thought it'd be and slimy too."

He wasn't sure why he was touched that she was trying to have that first be with him, but he was.

He reached for his shirt and wiped his stomach off and then pulled her up and over his chest.

“We’re all good, right?”

“You have to still ask that? Guess I didn’t do that good of a job then.”

“You did a great job,” he said. His hand was running over her hair.

“I’m still hungry,” she said. “How cold do you think the pizza is?”

“Cold pizza is good and totally worth it.”

“It is,” she said. “How fast do you think we can eat before we get back here?”

He rolled out of bed and she followed him, snapping her body suit up again. “Let’s try. You going to put some clothes on?” He was pulling his jeans on. His shirt was flying through the air for the laundry basket.

“Nope,” she said. “If you see me like this you’ll eat faster.”

“As I said...you’re evil,” he said.

She grinned. “You’re starting to like it, aren’t you?”

“Even more than I thought I might.”

She reached up and kissed him and they raced to the kitchen for food.

He’d never had this much fun with a woman he’d been in a relationship with before and wondered why and decided the pressure of a relationship failing might have been too much.

Yet he didn’t want to lose Chloe either.

MEANS TO AN END

Five days later, Chloe was worried she might be turning into a slut.

Never in her life had she ever thought she'd want a friends with benefits situation and yet it was working out so much better than she thought.

She felt a physical connection with Royce she never had with another man and she wondered if it had more to do with the fact there was no pressure to piss him off or get in a fight and then the messiness of a split.

They had ground rules that this was separate from work and one wouldn't be driven by the other.

Yep, they fought on Friday night but then got through it and laughed and hit the sheets with more intensity than she thought she'd feel.

The scarier part was she didn't want what they had to end and already seemed to be struggling to compartmentalize it into two silos.

She had to remind herself again and again this was temporary. She never thought it'd be long term. It was more a means to an end. At some point they'd both find someone else to settle down with.

For now it was going to work and it was fun to play with her bosses this way.

The fact Royce was coming to her office today to look over what she started yesterday from their meeting on Friday was a bonus.

He hadn't been to her place yet and was going to go there after he left here. She'd cook him dinner and they'd have a little bit more action in the sheets. This planning wasn't all that horrible in her eyes either.

"How are things going?" Ryder asked her an hour later.

She looked up at one of the boss's sons. "Pretty good. Something I can help you with?"

Ryder moved in. "Just wanted to know if you were playing with our fathers or not."

"Who wants to know?"

"Us too," Jade said, moving in fast with Drake behind her. Good lord, this was turning into more than she bargained for.

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about," she said, keeping a straight face.

Ryder shut her office door, keeping the four of them in private. "Really, Chloe? You're smart. We know it. One Clemson alumni to another, be square with me at least."

She laughed. Ryder only pulled that card out when he was desperate. "You need to tell me what I'm supposed to be playing with your fathers about."

"How about one woman to another," Jade said. "The four of us in this room know you are the next target along with Royce. Jonah and Megan seem to be on track, Flynn and Julia

engaged. They are spinning their wheels and getting nowhere with you. It's fun, but let us in on it to get on your side."

She was almost tempted to do that but decided that, no, she and Royce had an agreement. There was no way she was admitting to Ryder and Drake she was sleeping with Royce and nothing more. Maybe she'd say it to Jade, who would understand, but not the guys. It was a label she didn't need to be sewn to her clothing.

"There is nothing to say," she said. "We are coworkers of sorts. Even your fathers said we aren't meant for each other now and apologized for putting the pressure on me."

She watched as the three of them started to laugh. "You know what they are doing, right?" Drake asked.

"Of course I do," she said. "But it makes no difference in the matter. I work with Royce and barely see him otherwise. If I was interested, he's crazy busy and puts his job first. I like my me time. I've never been shy about saying that."

"Hmmm," Jade said. "Yeah, I see that side of it. Okay, boys. We've bugged Chloe enough. Out."

That was too easy in her eyes and the three of them left, but five minutes later, Jade returned and popped her head in. "Yes?" Chloe asked.

"Woman to woman, I get it more than you are saying. I'm here if you want to talk, but I know you won't. Keep it up."

There was nothing to say and she didn't bother. She knew Jade couldn't have figured out that she was just sleeping with Royce but probably suspected the two of them had something going on the side they were keeping quiet about.

Megan came in next. "Hey. How have you been?"

“Good,” she said. Megan liked to visit. “How is Jonah doing?”

“He’s all better now. So are we,” Megan said.

“That’s good to hear. It’s times like this that make me realize it’s nice to be single.”

Megan grinned. “I used to say that too. And trust me when I tell you that it’s nice to come and go when you want, but it’s better to have someone there for you too. As you know, Jonah and I don’t see much of each other. He’s at the gym all the time. I go there to work out and we see each other, but we don’t live together.”

“Yet,” Chloe said. She figured that was coming next.

“Yet,” Megan said. “Neither of our places is big enough. I do stay there a few nights and now he’s talking about looking for a house. Things are coming along. My point is, I get to have plenty of my me time and still get Jonah in my life. There is a way to get it all.”

“Compromise,” she said, laughing.

“Something like that,” Megan said. “What’s so funny?”

“My mother has been shoving that word down my throat for years. Guess I just need to find my Jonah then.”

“Well, you know Royce works a lot. You’d get plenty of me time. I feel like there is more going on than you are saying.”

Was she not doing that good of a job of hiding things?
“What makes you ask that?”

“I don’t know,” Megan said. “You’re always private and quiet at times and dance to your beat, but you do share.”

“Not much to share,” she said. She wouldn’t feel guilty about that either. She didn’t share often when she dated and this was no different. Just because everyone’s eyes were on her meant nothing to her.

“I’m not so sure. I get it though. Maybe it’s the Fierces are batting a thousand so everyone is just waiting for them to be right again regardless of how much someone fights it.”

She let out a sigh. That thought hadn’t popped into her head yet and it should have. It could be everyone could wait them out. More power to them. She was doing things her way.

“If there is something to report, I’ll let you know.”

“Do you promise?” Megan asked.

“I do,” she said. Friends with benefits weren’t what she’d report to anyone, so again, the guilt wasn’t going to be there.

Chloe went back to work and hoped for no more interruptions until Royce showed up in a few hours. He’d be here between three and four and she left for the day most times around five. He was going home to shower, he’d said, and then they would meet at her place. It’d give her time to do the same and cook dinner for them. Whether they had food before or after had yet to be determined though.

At two, she walked up front to see if there was anything in her mailbox. She didn’t get mail here, but other employees dropped things in there. It was better than hunting people down or leaving stuff on desks if they couldn’t be sent electronically.

She pulled a few pieces of paper out, some of it fliers for things in the building. There were renters on other floors and this wasn’t uncommon.

What was uncommon was a letter addressed to her with no return address on it. Well, it was addressed to Fierce Engineering then attention to her.

She brought everything back to her office. She got junk here at times too and figured it was nothing more than that.

When she opened it and pulled the handwritten letter out she wished it were junk.

It was from Emily Bask. Her birth mother. She knew the name. She'd always known, but hadn't really cared one way or another.

She read the letter twice more. It wasn't long, but just long enough that she shut her eyes and took a few breaths.

There was only one person she could talk to and that was her brother. No one here even knew she was adopted, as it had never come up. She was still surprised she'd told Royce when she hadn't some of her closest friends.

She sent Dane a text asking if he could call her when he had a minute. She figured it'd be tonight and Royce would be over, but she'd deal with it at that point.

What she didn't expect was her phone to ring ten minutes later. "Hello," she said to her brother. "Aren't you working?"

"I am," Dane said. "But I'm at the hospital doing rounds and snuck into the lounge. You never ask me to call you, you always text what you need. I guess I figured it was important."

"It is, but I don't want to bother you at work."

"You're not," Dane said. "It's not as if I've got patients waiting for me. I'm not going back to the office today. If I get behind I'm in the hospital anyway. I don't have the kids today either. I'm all yours. What is going on?"

She took a deep breath. “I got a letter from my birth mother delivered to my office today. I just opened it about twenty minutes ago.”

“Really?” Dane asked. “What’s her name again?”

“Emily Bask. She said she knew my name all along. She told herself she’d let me live my life, as she knew I’d have a better one than she could provide, but she’s been thinking of me more and more lately and did a search of me and saw my name here at Fierce and figured she’d try to reach out. She wasn’t on social media much.”

“Does she want to meet you?” Dane asked.

“She left her address, phone number and email address. She’d like to if I am willing. If I’m not, she understood too.”

“Are you going to tell Mom and Dad?” Dane asked.

“At some point. I guess I’m just stunned right now. I never saw this coming.”

She wasn’t sure why though. Lots of people reached out on either side of an adoption in their life. It was just she never really felt the need to. She was happy with the family and life she had. She wasn’t all that concerned about another family she had out there. They were strangers to her. Dane felt the same way about his birth parents.

Maybe it’s because it wasn’t a secret, so she didn’t need to research for information. She really didn’t know and decided it wasn’t worth internally searching for those answers.

“I don’t have a lot of advice for you,” Dane said. “You have to ask yourself if you want to open that up in your life. After reaching out and making contact, it will be hard to walk away again. That’s just my thought.”

“You’re right. I have no anger toward her, but if I meet her, I’m not that much of an ass to say I don’t want to talk to her again either. But I’m not looking for a friendship.”

“I understand,” Dane said. “You have no clue what her life has been like for the past thirty years. She could have married and had kids. They’d be your half siblings. Maybe you want to get to know them. Maybe you don’t. This is a Pandora box that you have to know once it’s opened, there is no closing it. That information is powerful enough to keep drawing you in or playing with your mind.”

This was why she called Dane. He’d get it more than anyone else. “You’ve put a lot of thought into this. I can tell. Why haven’t you said anything about it before?”

“Melanie and I talked about it once. She wanted me to find out more about my birth parents since we were having children of our own. There was part of me that wanted to know for medical purposes, but all these things I’m saying to you crossed my mind.”

“Was Melanie upset you didn’t do what she wanted?” she asked.

“It was one of many fights, but it didn’t stop us from having children. If I feel the need to find out more I can do it. I don’t see that need. Life is hard enough on the kids.”

“And you,” she said. “You had enough pressure and stress in your life and everything you’ve just said would have been one more area filling your head.”

“That’s it exactly,” he said. “Sometimes ignorance is bliss. Other times information can bring you bliss. That letter has opened up the possibility for you.”

“Which sucks,” she said.

“You don’t have to do anything right now. Or you can look into Emily yourself and see what you find. Maybe it’s all good things or it could be horrible and you don’t want that drama.”

“That is good advice too. I’ll sit on it for now and talk to Mom and Dad. I’ve never asked them about her. I bet they know more than we realize,” she said. Her parents would have wanted to keep track just in case. As much as they lectured her and Dane, they always loved and cared for them and would do what they felt was best.

“You’re probably right. I didn’t talk to Mom and Dad about it. I didn’t need someone else’s opinion at that point in my life.”

She laughed. “That’s another good point. I might not want theirs either. I’ll figure it out, but you did make me feel better about this.”

“Good,” he said. “I’m here if you need me.”

“Thanks, Dane.”

She put the letter in her purse and was going to go on with her day for now.

SAD AND DISTANT

Royce had been impressed with how Chloe kept their meeting strictly to work at her office. Grant and Garrett stopped in and she was almost more professional and distant than normal.

It could have been overkill, but he could see both of the Fierce men were baffled by the interaction. He shrugged it off and didn't take it to heart either.

But now that he was at Chloe's apartment, her demeanor was still like it was earlier and he wondered if there was more going on.

Could it be him? Was she deciding this wasn't working out already and didn't want to say it?

No, she was pretty straightforward. As much as it would pain him to end what they had, he'd honor it if she said it wasn't working out as well as she thought.

She was cooking burgers right now in a pan and there were fries in the oven. They didn't attack each other like they had the past two times. He really wasn't sure what to expect.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"What?" she asked, turning to him. She'd given him a kiss when he walked in, but it wasn't as passionate as most of their

other liplocks.

“I asked if you were okay? I thought you played it up well in the office earlier and Grant and Garrett were both confused, but now I see you’re acting the same way. If tonight wasn’t good you could have canceled.”

“It’s good,” she said. “I’ve just got a lot on my mind. Sorry.” She put a smile on her face and he could see it was forced. “After dinner I expect you to put me in a better mood. How is that?”

“It works for me,” he said. “But if you’d rather talk, we can too.”

Who was this guy that just offered to talk over sex? Wow. Elise would be laughing hysterically if she’d just heard that.

Chloe stopped working on dinner and turned to him. “I’ll be fine,” she said. “I know we are keeping this light.”

He let out a sigh. If she was troubled he didn’t want her holding it in or pushing it off because he was here for sex.

He moved closer to her and pulled her into his arms and gave her a hug. She stiffened and then relaxed. He just held her and it felt better than he thought it would. Must be it did for her too because she relaxed and then sniffled and he wondered if she was crying.

Shit, he wasn’t equipped for this. He lifted her chin with his hand and saw her eyes a little glossy.

“Everything is not okay,” he said. “Tell me what is going on. I’m here and you’re cooking for me. No reason to sit in silence or make up a conversation.”

She grabbed a paper towel and wiped her face and eyes.

“You don’t want to hear about my drama,” she said.

Surprisingly he actually did. “I’ve told you enough about mine,” he said. “There are two parts to our agreement. Friends and then benefits. You’d tell a friend, right?”

She snorted out a laugh and then covered her mouth. “Actually, no, I don’t think I’d tell my friends this because they don’t know the whole part of it. But you do and that got me thinking why I said that to you.”

“What part?” he asked.

“The adoption part,” she said. “I’ve never told any of my friends. Not in adulthood. It’s not like I’m embarrassed or upset or hiding it. It’s just one of those things in my life that just is and I forget half the time.”

“Which shows your parents love you a great deal,” he said. He could say that because he felt it with his father, just not his mother.

“They do. They’ve always been open with Dane and me. You know, even telling me like it is that I don’t compromise in life and will probably end up single with ten cats at some point.”

He winced. “Do you like cats?”

“God no,” she said. “I’m not much of an animal person really. They are fine for other people but not me. Call me selfish, but that is a responsibility and time to care for them and makes it hard for me to do my own thing.”

It was the tongue-in-cheek way she said it that had him laughing. “Then what is going on or happened today to make you sad and distant?”

“Those are good words. But it’s not either of those things. I’m not sad. Or I wasn’t until you hugged me. Why did you?” she asked. She went back to checking on the dinner.

“Because you looked like you needed it. You know, what a friend might do.”

“I guess I did need it with the tears coming into my eyes like that. I appreciate you seeing and recognizing something I didn’t even know. You’ll be a good catch for a woman someday.”

“Says no one ever,” he said.

He wasn’t going to think of being with anyone else other than the woman in this room. He was staying in the present and not trying to figure out the future.

“I think the same has been applied to me multiple times too,” she said.

She was almost avoiding his questions and he wondered if maybe he should just let it drop. He wasn’t going to beg her to open up.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, it’s fine. Just know you can.”

She flipped the burgers over without saying a word and then opened the oven and shook the fries in the pan.

“I received a letter from my birth mother today out of the blue sent to my office. I opened and read it an hour before you showed up. It’s knocked me back several steps in my mind.”

“Oh,” he said. “Did you know her name and all?”

“I do. As I said, my parents have been very open with Dane and me about where we came from and who they were. We knew we could ask them questions and just never did. I never saw the reason. They are my parents and they raised me. Like any other kid, I had fights with my parents, but I never once said to myself I wasn’t their kid and maybe I was going

to find out who my real parents were. They are my real parents in my eyes.”

“That’s nice,” he said. “I’ve got to imagine they are thrilled you feel that way.”

“I think so. We don’t talk about it because if Dane and I don’t bring it up, they don’t.”

He found that kind of odd but figured she seemed to have a good handle on this. “What was this letter about?”

She moved to her purse and pulled it out and handed it over for him to read while she got plates down. He was surprised she’d done that.

“It’s not much, as you can see. I don’t know why she reached out, but she did.”

“Have you told anyone else about this?”

“I called Dane and told him. As always, he said things that made me think more.”

“Like what?”

“He said it’s going to open a Pandora box. It could be good or bad, but once the box is open I can’t shut it again. I think this letter already lifted it a crack though.”

“He’s right. There is this other family you’ve never thought of before and now they are in your head. Do you want to know them or not? Can you turn them out at this point either way? You seem to have a questioning mind, but I’m also willing to bet you want to know more before you make the next step.”

“I do,” she said. “Dane told me his ex-wife wanted him to find out about his birth family and he didn’t. He’d had all these thoughts in his head that I didn’t know about so he was

good about giving me advice. Melanie said she wanted to know before they had kids, but obviously that didn't happen. If Dane feels the need to do it, he will. I think it was wrong of Melanie to do that to Dane. What if he didn't know who his birth parents were? Would she say he was tainted or something and couldn't give her a child?"

"That might be part of the reason they aren't married anymore," he said. "I'm going to assume Melanie knew this when she married Dane so why bring it up after the fact."

"Exactly," she said. "I know when my time comes I'll make sure who I'm with knows my history. If it bothers them though, then they can go fuck off. It's not like I had or have any control over it."

He laughed. "You took the words right out of my mouth. How many people stayed with their birth parents and know their genetics and are still assholes?"

"See, you get it. And Dane is a doctor. We probably all have poor health genes in our system that are dormant. If someone wants genetic testing done from me before I give them a child then they can go find some other Stepford wife to be on their arm."

He had to laugh over that comment. He wasn't sure why they were talking about children and spouses, but it wasn't making his heart race for him to run out the door like it had with other women he'd dated in the past.

"You've got a good attitude about it. What's your next step?"

"I need to know more about this woman. Dane seems to think my parents might know. He's probably right. As annoying as they are about things and their advice in my life,

they have always put us first. My guess is they might have kept tabs at some point to know something if either of us ever asked. Once I hear what they have to say, then I'll consider looking into Emily more myself. I don't know what I'm going to do, but I won't go in blind either. That isn't how I operate."

"As we know," he said. "Need to have those ground rules."

She smiled at him and pulled the fries out of the oven, put cheese on the burgers and grabbed water for her and beer for him. "You deserve this after listening to my drama today."

He took the beer out of her hand. "That's not a lot of drama," he said. "I think it's more it caught you unaware and when that happens it builds more in our mind. Sounds to me like you've got a good game plan and that shouldn't surprise me either."

"No," she said. "I'll be okay once I talk to my parents. I'll give them a call tomorrow and see about going to visit this weekend. I'll do a little research myself before then and see if I can find her on the internet. As tempted as I was to do it today, I had to push it aside. I had you coming over."

"You could have canceled," he said.

She put the burgers on a plate and set the rolls out. "Help yourself to what you want," she said.

He picked a plate up and got his dinner ready. "What if what I want is you?"

"Which is why I didn't cancel," she said. "Because even though I'm very appreciative that we talked about this, what I needed was just you."

He looked at her. "Human contact and a physical release to feel like you are in control again?"

He wasn't joking when he said it. He didn't want to be hurt if she said yes, but he expected her to be honest and it was best to continue with the way things were.

“It started out that way in my mind,” she said. “But it turned into so much more. I might have just surprised both of us.”

He leaned down to kiss her on the lips before he sat down to eat. “I think you're right.”

DID SOMETHING RIGHT

Chloe had sat on the news for a few days and finally called to go see her parents.

She was shocked she ended up telling Royce what had happened with the letter but even more stunned when he was so supportive.

She wasn't sure why she was when he hadn't given her any reason to think he wouldn't be.

They were friends still, he'd reminded her.

If she was thinking it'd be nice to be more than that, she shut those thoughts behind a wall and used a nail gun to rapid fire it closed.

He'd not only listened to her but said he had a friend that was a private investigator, that if she thought she wanted to look into Emily some more he'd get her in contact.

It had merit and she'd thought of it for a few days too, but right now it was better to see what her parents had to say.

"Chloe," her mother said when she walked in Saturday morning. "It's been a while since we've seen you. Have you been busy?"

“No,” she said. “Not really. Nothing more than normal everyday life. How have you been?”

“The kids will be here later. I’m watching them for the night since Dane is on call. He’s with them now and then will bring them over while he runs to the hospital for rounds. He said he knows he’ll have to go back later because there are things going on so he didn’t want to worry about waking them to bring them back.”

She knew her brother hated to give his time up when he had the kids, but if work called he had no choice. He never wanted it to be held against him with Melanie in a custody battle.

“I know that bothers him to do it,” she said.

“It does, but he’s staying here too.”

She hadn’t known that. “Oh, then he still is here if they want him or need him but can leave if he wants to?”

“Exactly,” her mother said. “I know it hasn’t been ideal for him to do this, but it works out. We’ve got enough rooms in this house.”

Her parents put two single beds in her old room for the kids and Dane’s room and another guest room had queen beds in it for guests.

“You do what you need to do,” she said.

“That’s right. And I can tell there is something on your mind. What is it?”

“Is Dad here?”

“He’s in the garage.” Her mother looked at her. “This sounds serious. Are you sick?”

“No,” she said. “Nothing like that. But I’d like to talk to you both if Dad can come in.”

“I’ll go get him,” her mother said.

She took a seat and pulled the letter out of her purse. She’d let them read it. There was no reason not to.

“Mom said you wanted to talk to us?” her father said, coming in.

“Yes,” Chloe said. “I’m fine. I’m not sick or anything like that. But I did get this letter from Emily Bask earlier in the week.”

“What?” her mother asked, reaching for it.

Her parents read it together, then her father asked, “What are you going to do?”

She was surprised they were so calm about this. “I really don’t know. If she never reached out I believe there is part of me that wouldn’t have thought twice about her. I know who my parents are.”

Her parents looked at each other and smiled softly. “Then we did something right. But we also always knew there might come a time when you and Dane would want to know more too and have accepted that.”

“Do you know anything about her? I never asked before. I guess I should know what you know before I decide anything else.”

“Emily was sixteen when she had you,” her mother said. “Unlike Dane’s mother, Emily knew right away she didn’t want to raise you. We were put in contact with her right away. You know all of this. We brought you home two days after you were born.”

“No father listed,” Chloe said.

“No. Emily never told us and she said she didn’t know,” her father said.

“But you don’t believe that, do you?” she asked. Chloe wasn’t sure why she never thought of that before. Maybe because she never thought of any of this before.

“She didn’t come off as someone who slept around,” her mother said. “She made a mistake.”

“I’m a mistake?” she asked.

“No, no,” her father said. “Never.”

Chloe wasn’t sure why she reacted that way just now. “I guess I’m just sensitive to this.”

“It’s understandable,” her mother said. “Emily was young and got pregnant. That is a mistake. She used those words to us too. But it wasn’t a mistake to us. You were a miracle we’d been waiting for. Emily’s parents were pushing the adoption, but we never got the impression that she didn’t want it either.”

“What do you know about her now? Anything?”

“For years we tried to keep up on what we could. She never wanted to know about you. She never reached out or anything,” her father said.

She wasn’t sure she knew that was even an option. “Did you want her to? Or Dane’s mother?”

“Not really,” her mother said. “You were ours, but again, we wanted to do what we thought was right.”

It was nice to hear that. For years she’d thought her parents weren’t reasonable, but she supposed they were better than most parents might be in *this* situation.

She should keep that in mind when they told her time and again she should compromise. Maybe they felt they did in her life and it worked out.

Something to think about another time.

“You said for years you tried to keep up with Emily. What do you know?”

“She had you,” her father said. “Then she graduated from high school a year later. She said she didn’t know what she wanted to do with her life but knew she couldn’t raise you. I will admit I wasn’t sure if she’d go to college or anything, but she did. Last we knew she was a nurse.”

“Wow,” Chloe said. “If she’d kept me then she probably wouldn’t have been able to do that.”

“I’m sure. She did seem as if she was from a good family. We met her parents. As we said, they were pushing this and Emily didn’t seem to be arguing over it,” her mother said. “We wanted to know her opinion. The last thing we wanted was to get ready for you, bring you home and then find out she wanted you back.”

“That can happen?” Chloe asked.

“There is a window of time in which they can change their minds, yes,” her father said.

“Do you know if she ever married or anything? Just because this letter is the same last name doesn’t mean anything.”

“We don’t know that,” her mother said. “It’s been years. Do you want to know more about her before you reach out? We can help you with that.”

She wasn't going to say Royce suggested that to her. No reason to let her parents know that she'd told a friend, least of all a guy. They'd want to know what Royce was to her and right now she wasn't so sure of the answer herself.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," she said. "I've been thinking about it for days. I talked to Dane. He brought up a good point."

"Melanie wanted him to find his birth parents. Your brother wasn't interested," her mother said.

"You know about that?" she asked.

"Melanie told me. Dane never did. I think it caused more than one rift, but it didn't stop her from having kids either. She was a bit of a control freak," her mother said.

She just smiled. No reason to say more. This wasn't about Dane's life. "He had to live with her," she said. "But what he said to me was this letter opened up a lot of questions. If I shut it now I don't know that much and can move on. Maybe. But the more I find out, the harder it is to walk away. I have to figure out what I want from this."

"That is right," her father said. "This is about you, not Emily."

She was happy to get support from her parents on this issue. "I'll think some more and go from there. I have to ask myself if I want her in my life. I don't know if I'm the type of person that can find out things and then just move on."

"You've never had any problem walking away from people in your life before," her mother pointed out.

"This is different and you know it. What if I've got siblings? Or other nieces and nephews?"

“You could have all those things,” her father said. “I wish we knew why Emily was reaching out after all this time, but the only way to find out is to contact her.”

“I know. I’m in no rush for that decision. I guess I just thought you might know more.”

“We’ve told you all we know,” her mother said. “If you want us to find out more, we will.”

“No,” she said. “I have to do this on my own. So please, don’t do anything.”

She could tell her parents were torn and wanted to, but she hoped they’d honor her request.

SLID INTO DATING

Almost three weeks later, Royce opened the door for Chloe on Valentine's Day. He'd gotten out of work an hour earlier than normal. He really needed to be at work. There was so much going on and not enough hands to get it done, but he was trying to not be that person again.

Too many years of doing it and he was still single.

He'd like to think he wasn't single now and wanted to keep it that way.

She'd done the same. Left work early too. This was a two-way street in his eyes.

For two people who were keeping this light, somehow in his mind they'd slid into dating. Which was why he was putting the extra effort in.

The funny part was, neither of them had said a word about it and it was as if there was this fear if they did, it would ruin what they had.

Though they'd been in contact pretty much daily, whether it was a work conversation or a funny text, they hadn't done much other than have sex or meals at each other's house.

Valentine's Day being the Hallmark holiday that it was, he wanted to take her out, but something told him not to broach

it. Again, treading lightly.

“I’ve got dessert,” she said, moving in to give him a kiss on the lips. “I’m hoping you’ve got dessert for me later too.”

In the end he suggested he pick dinner up and have it at his house and he’d jokingly told her to plan on staying the night, that he wanted her in his bed for hours.

She’d laughed and mentioned dessert and it was how they always seemed to get to where they were.

“You know I’ve got what you need,” he said, his arm moving around her waist and pulling her close. He never used to be touchy feely like this either.

“You do,” she said, laughing. “Food. It smells good. What did you get?”

He moved back and took the box out of her hand and brought it to the kitchen. She slipped her jacket off and hung it and was right after him with her overnight bag on her shoulder.

“You said you like seafood and it’s not something either of us cooks. I got this spicy shrimp, clam and scallops dish over fettuccine and then a seafood casserole. I figured we can both have some of each if you want.”

“Aw,” she said, winking at him. “Like in *Lady and the Tramp*?”

He rolled his eyes. “Sure, if it makes you feel good to think that. What did you bring for dessert?”

She grabbed the box from his hand and opened it, then put it on the counter. “Brownies. Dark rich and gooey brownies that have red hearts on them. Aren’t we just such special friends today?”

He laughed but then decided maybe he'd had enough of this charade they had going on.

“Is it really just that still?” he asked.

He pulled plates down and got the food out of the oven where he'd had it stored to keep it warm. He'd only beaten her here by ten minutes and it allowed him to take a fast shower and change.

“Is what that?” she asked. She wasn't looking at him but opening up the food and all but licking her lips. He didn't think she was playing with him as much as maybe she didn't get what he was asking.

“Are we still just in this friends with benefits situation? It seems to me that it's evolved to more without us even knowing it.”

She stopped and looked up. Just stared at him. He could see the wheels turning. “It does seem that.”

At least she acknowledged it. “And?” he asked. “What are your thoughts on that?”

“I'm not sure I've thought one way or another. I mean, it's working, right? Do we need to have a name for it at this point?”

He let out a relieved breath. “No. You're right.”

They started to fill their plates up. “I still don't want the Fierces to know,” she said. “Or is that something you are trying to feel me out about too?”

“No,” he said. “None of that has changed. I think I've been hesitant to even bring this up because it seems whenever I'm in a relationship—”

“It's a relationship now?” she asked, grinning at him.

She was yanking on his chain *now*, he knew. “Whatever it is, it’s working,” he clarified. “I didn’t buy you a gift today, so if it is a relationship, then I suck as a boyfriend. Guess I’ve been told that enough too.”

He wouldn’t admit that he’d considered getting her something but knew that would be pushing it. He was just happy they were having this conversation.

“You’re not the only one,” she said. “I would be a sucky girlfriend that doesn’t want to put anyone first but herself.”

“You don’t do that with me,” he said. They sat down and started to eat. Both of them putting a portion of the two dinners on their plates.

“Because there is no pressure,” she said. “I don’t do well with pressure.”

“Doesn’t seem that way to me,” he said. “You’ve got a lot of pressure in your life and your job.”

“Yep. I do well there. But with men, not so much. Really, Royce. I like what we’ve got. I’ve seen the change as you have, but I’m worried it will shift our dynamic. Which of course I don’t want to happen.”

“I understand that,” he said. “That is why we should be able to talk about this like friends and come to terms with it. Maybe we need new rules. Or added rules.”

She was slurping up her pasta and got some sauce on the side of her face. He laughed at her and reached over to wipe it off. “What new rules? Will they be kinky?” she asked.

It was the heat in her eyes mixed with the words that had his dick shifting in his jeans. He started to eat faster.

“We can add that kind of a rule if you want. What I was going to suggest was that in private we are more than our original arrangement. That we are open and free with each other. No holding back. But once we aren’t together behind closed doors we still do what we’ve been.”

Her head shifted back and forth for a second. “That’s doable. I mean, we kind of have been doing it anyway. See, I can compromise. Yay me. My mother would be so pleased.”

He laughed when she said that. “Speaking of your parents,” he said.

“I wasn’t talking about them,” she said, stabbing at a scallop. “This is out of this world.”

“It is pretty good,” he said. “Have they said anything to you about Emily?”

“No,” she said. “They are good at giving me space. I told you I like my space.”

He wondered if he just infringed on it by bringing this up. But he hadn’t done it once since the first time she’d told him about the letter and then her conversation with her parents.

“You do. But as a friend—”

“More than a friend right now,” she said, smirking at him. Damn, she was a riot. He was glad that he brought this conversation up today and wasn’t so sure why he was nervous about it.

He looked at his watch. “As a boyfriend for the next twelve hours or so.”

“That’s better,” she said. “This is fun. I hope you know I’m just busting on you. I’m good with it all. I guess I want to make sure that we still have this freedom to have fun. I really

don't want that to change with us. I've never experienced it with another guy and deep down I wonder if it's because I haven't felt that pressure with you like I have with someone else."

"I know you better than you might want me to," he said. "And if you don't want to talk about Emily you don't have to."

"There isn't much to say," she said. "I have been doing some internet searches and I'm coming up empty. I'm starting to wonder if she is married and that is why I can't find anything on her."

"I can reach out to Zander if you want," he said.

"I'm not sure. How well do you know him? Is he someone that will tell someone else that we are trying to keep things from?"

He grinned and reached for a piece of bread that came with their dinner. "No. Zander and I went to school together. He worked for the Durham Police Department and then realized he wasn't one for rules and political agendas. He left a few years ago and started his own PI firm."

"I think I might like him," she said. "If you're willing, maybe it wouldn't hurt to talk to him. You can just give me his number and I'll reach out."

"No," he said. "I'd like to be there with you. I know it won't just be the two of us behind closed doors, but you can trust him. For something this big in your life, you shouldn't be alone."

She nodded her head. "Thank you for that."

They continued to eat and then cleaned up their dinner and put the leftovers in the fridge. "Dessert in the kitchen or the bedroom?" he asked.

“I think we eat it now,” she said. “Because once we get to your room I don’t want to come back out for anything.” She ran her finger down his chest.

“You like toying with me, don’t you?”

“I do,” she said. “But right now I think I need something dark and rich in my mouth.”

“I’ve got something rich to put in your mouth,” he said, laughing.

“Oh yeah. That too.”

She scooted away from him and grabbed the box, pulled out one of the two massive brownies and cut it in half. He grabbed one half and her the other. They each took a bite, then he wiped some of the frosting on his finger and ran it down the side of her neck.

“I can think of something else to do with this dessert,” he said, his mouth dipping down and licking the sweet concoction off.

“Take your shirt off,” she said.

He laughed and did. She took the brownie and rubbed it on his chest and he tried not to cringe. “Yep, this works.” She grabbed his hand and pulled him to his room. “I’m really good at cleaning things up. Let me have room to get to work.”

“You can have all the space and time you need,” he said, lying on the bed where she’d given him a little playful shove.

Yeah, whatever they had was working out better than he ever thought it might.

SWEET AND DOMESTIC

““M

orning, Chloe.”

She turned to look at Jade standing in her doorway the next day. She had part of the other brownie that didn't get eaten on her desk. Royce had taken the other half of that one too. It's not like she got to eat her first half the traditional way and spent more time licking it off his chest.

Last night hadn't been anything at all like she expected it to be.

She went to his house planning on having fun and laughing like always. She walked away feeling fuller in her life than ever before.

She'd give him credit for broaching the subject that had been the ping-pong ball in her head for weeks.

There was one thing to be said about the way they started things. They were friends and it seemed to be something they didn't want to lose.

A respect where they could talk openly with each other.

Yep, they'd had some disagreements. They'd fought a bit too. But they always worked it out.

Compromise. Funny how that word was sticking in her head now.

“Good morning, Jade. How are you feeling today?”

“Good as gold,” Jade said. “This pregnancy is a piece of cake. Or should I say brownie like the one on your desk?”

She looked down and laughed. “It is good. And you look great as always.”

“I popped out faster with this one, but they say that is normal with the second. Adriana did too.”

Adriana was Jade’s twin Wyatt’s wife. They were due within a few weeks of each other and the announcement came on New Year’s Day.

“Did you have a nice Valentine’s Day?” Chloe asked.

“I did. Brock cooked for me and Lucas made me a card.”

“That’s very sweet,” she said.

“And what did you do last night?” Jade asked, moving in. Her eyes on the brownie again.

“Had a nice dinner and some dessert,” she said. She picked up some of the brownie and put it in her mouth. “As you can tell, there is a bit left over.”

“Looks like there might be a red heart on there that was cut in half. Did someone else get that second half?”

She grinned at Jade. If there was one person she could say something to in the Fierce family it was the woman standing here, but she wasn’t doing it. She’d tell Megan or Raina first and she wasn’t at that point yet.

She and Royce had an addendum to their agreement and she wasn’t going to break it. No reason to jinx a good thing

since it was working out so well for them.

“My hand was on the second half,” she said. It wasn’t a lie, which she didn’t like to do. Her hand was on the other half when she cut it this morning and put it in Royce’s lunch that he was making.

It was kind of sweet and domestic that they both grabbed the leftover dinner to have for lunch today. She wasn’t used to spending the night with a guy when she had to go to work the next day and wasn’t sure how it was going to work out, but it was fine.

It seemed everything they did was fine. Better than fine.

“I’m sure it was,” Jade said. “Remember, keep it up.”

She laughed. There was no reason to dispute anything, but she wasn’t acknowledging it either. “I’m sure your father and uncle will be in to see me at some point, right?”

“They will be. Whatever game they are playing with you doesn’t seem to be working for them. I think it’s driving them nuts more than they thought.”

“Not everyone falls for it,” she said.

“Don’t kid yourself,” Jade said. “*Everyone* falls for it. It’s just how long it takes and how much pain my father and uncle have to go through before they rub people’s noses in it.”

Jade was laughing when she walked out and Chloe couldn’t argue that statement.

But she’d be damned if she’d let someone else take credit for where she was with her boyfriend...Royce. It was Royce when they weren’t together and behind closed doors.

She got back to work and just as she expected, Grant and Garrett both walked into her office after lunch.

“Gentlemen,” she said. “What can I do for you?”

“We didn’t see you in the cafeteria at lunch today,” Grant said. “We thought we’d make the rounds telling everyone that there are still a lot of cookies left from yesterday.”

They were always good about bringing treats in for holidays. “I might have to check it out later,” she said. “But I had a big brownie this morning.”

She watched as Garrett’s eyes lit up. “Did someone give you a brownie?”

“Nope,” she said. “I stopped and got it at the bakery yesterday. No reason I couldn’t buy myself a frosted brownie with a big old heart on it. Jade even saw me eating the other half. Half last night, half this morning.”

Both of the men looked at each other and frowned. She really shouldn’t take so much pleasure in this.

“If you let us get to work on someone for you, you wouldn’t have had to eat a brownie by yourself,” Grant said.

She smiled at them. “I’m good on my own. I didn’t have to share this way.”

Both of their shoulders dropped. At least they didn’t say Royce’s name. She couldn’t wait until they left so she could text Royce and let him know what was going on. She’d bet he was getting it on his end too, but he’d said he was staying away from the office today. She didn’t have that option.



“IVAN FINALLY GOT ENGAGED,” Jolene yelled into the phone. Garrett was sitting on the couch with his wife, and his brother

and Diane were on the call too with their sister-in-law in Charlotte.

“You didn’t think that was ever going to happen,” Carolyn said.

“Tell me about it,” Jolene said. “I’ll send you a picture of the ring when we hang up. Boy, he outdid himself. I bet it took him forever to find the right deal.”

“Stop,” Diane said, laughing. “We know you’re picking on him.”

“I am,” Jolene said. “It’s hard not to.”

“So how did he propose?” Diane asked.

“I have no idea. I haven’t talked to either of them. It’s been over an hour. I got a picture of the ring and they aren’t replying, but I know they are reading the messages. I tried to call my sister and she’s not answering either. She’s seeing my texts too. I think they are all in on making me wait.”

There was a lot of laughter over that comment. At least someone was making progress because he and his brother sure the hell weren’t with Chloe and Royce. “Might be payback for you getting on their case over the past few holidays.”

“Well,” Jolene said. “He was dragging his feet forever. I couldn’t figure out what was going on.”

“It’s not up to you to figure it out,” Carolyn said.

“I know, I know. So fill me in with what is going on with you two. How are things with Jonah at the very least?”

“They are there,” Diane said. “It’s hard to get much on it when the guys seem to be doing more of the work.”

Jolene laughed. “You two need to push your way in there more.”

“It’s not as easy as you. We aren’t in the office and don’t have a reason to be there all that much. Those two husbands of ours are having more fun than we do,” Carolyn said.

“And they pick on us,” Jolene said. Garrett was biting his tongue right now, as he knew Grant was too. This was the girls talking, but once Jolene was off, he knew his wife and Diane were going to be on their cases.

“How are things with Faith?” Diane asked.

“Don’t go there. I swear each one is worse than the one before. My own kids weren’t this bad at withholding things from me, but there is some progress. I mean she’s in a relationship once I got her to admit it.”

“That is what you get for all the years of nagging,” Carolyn said. “Good thing I never did that with any of my kids.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jolene said. “Keep me posted if you have anything to report. Now go enjoy the night with your husbands like you know I’m going to.”

Jolene hung up and Garrett’s wife looked at him. “Okay, boys. Fill us in. Anything to report with Chloe and Royce or have you totally botched this one up without our help?”

He sighed and Grant spoke first. “We’re trying. I’m starting to think she is either on to us, playing, or she is immune.”

“Yeah. I’m with Grant. I think she is playing with us. No one is immune.”

Diane laughed. “You two keep telling yourselves that. We’ll let you off the hook now, but pretty soon Carolyn and I are going to step up. Right, Carolyn?”

“I like watching them flounder like this. I’m willing to give you more time.”

Garrett looked at the grin on his wife’s face. “We’ll come out on top in the end. We always do,” he said. He had to believe that because he wasn’t ready to cry defeat yet.

A VICTORY

““**W**hat are you doing here this early?” Royce asked Elise on Wednesday morning. He’d avoided the office yesterday because he knew his sister would be in his face about Chloe. It wasn’t as if he didn’t have a shitload of work to do and found himself chipping in at one of the houses to try to get them back on track.

He’d give Elise credit for staying out of it, but the closer they’d gotten to Valentine’s Day the more his sister was dropping hints faster than his men calling in sick and he didn’t need her to slip around their father.

“You didn’t come in yesterday,” Elise said. “I knew you’d do it today early and I wanted to catch you.”

“Why?” he asked. “What is going on?”

“Dad,” Elise said. “He’s really going overboard.”

“About what?” he asked. “I talked to him Monday and yesterday about work.” His father and he were covering things as best as they could, but he didn’t need his father overdoing it either. It was on Royce to step up and figure this out and he was.

“Work is fine,” Elise said, waving her hand. “It’s our personal lives. On top of what he is trying to do with you and the Fierces, he’s making comments to me now.”

He laughed. “Like what?”

“That he hopes that their marriage didn’t damage me or make me nervous about trying with someone.”

“Ouch,” he said, grinning. He started to walk out of his office to get coffee and Elise was following him. “What did you say?”

“I sputtered about the damaged comment, then threw it in his face that he never tried again.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing,” Elise said. “Or nothing more than what he always did. That he was too old to change his ways and he liked his life the way it was.”

“Did you tell him you liked your life the way it was too?” he asked.

“I did and all he did was shake his head at me.”

“Don’t know what to tell you,” he said, shrugging. If the pressure was off of him he was thrilled. “He hasn’t said anything to me in weeks.”

Which he could appreciate.

Though he was thrilled that he and Chloe had an understanding that there was more going on with them than a booty call, he was still going to honor their original agreement that no one knew.

He wasn’t so sure how long he wanted to go on like that, but at some point, he’d address it. For now, he’d take the little

step from two nights ago as a victory in itself.

More so when Chloe was texting him that her bosses weren't letting up. He didn't appreciate they didn't throw his name at her again and then had to tell himself he couldn't get annoyed over that either. He had her and he had to figure out a way to make sure he kept her.

"Which means he's almost coming after me now," Elise complained. "I feel like maybe you betrayed me to save your own skin. What is going on with you and Chloe?"

He filled his cup with coffee and dumped some creamer in it. "I would never betray you and you know it," he said. "I'm insulted you'd think that."

"What else am I supposed to think?" Elise whined like she did when they were teens.

"That Dad is getting older and wants us settled down? There isn't anything new there. He's made comments like that over the years. I think you're just more sensitive to them is all."

"And you're not because you've got someone and no one knows."

"Quiet," he said. "Dad can sneak in here and you know it."

Elise got a cup of coffee and then followed him to his office. Looked like he wasn't getting a break today.

"You didn't tell me how things were going with Chloe. Since you didn't dispute the fact you've got someone I'm going to assume things are going well? Whatever they may be?"

"They are fine," he said.

"Come on, Royce. Give me something."

“Why?” he asked.

“Because we’ve always talked to each other before. I feel like I’m losing you.”

He thought maybe she was joking but then realized she wasn’t. Shit. Not only couldn’t he manage a relationship with a woman without fucking up, now his sister was needing him and he didn’t even catch on.

He ran his hand through his hair. “You’re not losing me,” he said. “Good lord. I think you’re playing with me.”

Elise shrugged. “Just give me a little.”

He sighed and supposed it wasn’t the end of the world. He was ready to open his mouth when he heard his father’s voice and pointed his finger at his sister. She laughed as if she knew they were almost caught.

“Children,” his father said, coming into the doorway of his office. “What are the two of you talking about this morning?”

“Nothing much,” Elise said. “Just our dismal personal lives. I told him it’s not fair that you are bringing up the fact that I might be damaged and not saying it to him when we are both in the same boat.”

His father looked between the two of them. “It doesn’t seem to matter what I say as nothing changes. But the truth is, I’m not getting any younger and would like to see another generation of Kennedys at some point. Your window is smaller than your brother’s.”

Royce saw Elise almost growl at that statement and he was going to stick up for his sister. “That’s harsh,” he said.

“The truth often is. Sorry, Elise. You’re both a disappointment to me in that department. All I can hope for is

that one of these days you both find someone that makes you happy.”

His father left and went to his office and Elise shut his door. “Do you see what I mean? That was overkill.”

“He’s playing with you,” he said, laughing.

“What?” Elise asked.

“You’re sensitive for some reason. Didn’t you see him wink when he walked out?”

“No, he didn’t,” Elise argued.

“Yes, he did,” he said. Maybe his father only winked at *him* but he still did it.

“Do you think he’s being harsh on me so that you think you’re off the hook? Could he be that sly?”

He snorted. “I have no idea. I’ll go talk to him to make sure he eases up on you.”

“Thanks, Royce. I’m not sure why it’s bothering me. I think it’s because he *is* actually trying to set you up. He’s never done that before. Do you think he really is worried he won’t see grandkids? He seems fine health-wise. I ask him all the time.”

“I do too,” he said. “Let it go. He’s getting desperate for some reason.”

“If he knew you had something going with Chloe he’d ease off of both of us, I’m sure,” Elise pointed out. “You still didn’t say what is going on.”

“I’m not letting him or anyone else know. You aren’t even supposed to know and I’m lucky I got away with my skin intact after I told Chloe you figured it out.”

She laughed. “At least you two talk about things.”

“We talk about a lot of things,” he said. “What we’ve got works for us, but we are keeping it quiet. End of story. When we are ready for others to know, I’ll fill you in.”

“Fine. I get it. I got more out of you than I thought I would,” Elise said.

His sister left and he decided to go talk to his father. He had some things to go over for work anyway and then he’d ease into the fact that all these comments were upsetting Elise. He wasn’t sure if his father was aware or not, but it wouldn’t hurt to bring it up.

He grabbed his laptop and went to his father’s office. “Got a minute?” he asked.

“Always,” his father said. “Come in.”

“Before we get to work, I just wanted to let you know that I know you’re only busting on us, but Elise is spinning her wheels. She’s a little hurt over the comments.”

His father looked upset by the information. “Shit. Maybe your mother was right all along. I don’t know how to talk to women.”

His shoulders dropped. “Don’t let Mom get into your head any more than I tell Elise to not let it happen to her or me. We know you mean well. I saw you wink at me, but she didn’t. She’s a bit sensitive is all. “

“I’ll talk to her,” his father said. “I didn’t mean anything by it. I just want you guys to have a better life than I had.”

“We’ve got a great life,” he said. “Not everyone is meant to be in a cozy relationship. If it happens, it does. You can’t force these things.”

His father looked as if he was going to say more and then finally said, “You know that Grant and Garrett wanted to set you up with Chloe Grey, right?”

“Yes, Dad. It’s not a secret. I also know that you are involved in it too.”

“I’m not good at these things,” his father said, looking defeated. Yep, it was overkill as Elise said. “I just want what is best for my kids.”

“I know you do. But we have to figure that out on our own. You wouldn’t want anyone to push a woman on you, would you?”

“No,” his father said. “I was wrong to do it. I hope you accept my apology for this.”

“No reason to apologize,” he said. “We can all move on now. I’ve got work to go over with you if you’ve got time.”

They got to work. At least he could take his mind off of this now and move on.



“I DON’T KNOW how many more tactics I can try,” Richard said to Grant and Garrett later that afternoon when they met at the commercial building. Royce was on site at another project and Richard said he’d check in on things here and the Fierces just happened to stop over to get an update too. He knew his son was working more than normal and that wasn’t helping their cause any so he was trying to cover what he could.

The timing of this project and setting his son up wasn’t working in their favor.

“What did you do or say?” Grant asked.

He explained what happened this morning. “I laid it out. I apologized. He said it was fine and moved on. It’s like it’s not even fazing him.”

“Do you think he’s messing with you?” Garrett asked. “There is part of me that thinks Chloe is with us, but we aren’t close enough to her to be that bold.”

“I thought you two were always bold,” he said. “But the truth is, I’m not sure. Royce is working twelve- to fourteen-hour days. I don’t know where he has time unless it’s on the weekend. And even then he is always doing something around his house or working on things for the business.”

“With most people we are bold,” Grant said. “But this one is throwing us.”

“I don’t think Royce is, but I have no idea anymore either. The older my kids get, the more private they are. I even upset my daughter trying to figure this out.”

He’d gone to apologize to Elise. He really did feel bad and said he was only joking. The last thing he’d ever do is put the pressure on her like he’d felt in his life. He’d promised himself that his kids wouldn’t feel what he did in his marriage and yet here he was doing it without knowledge.

It was a wakeup call for him to dial it back.

“What happened there?” Garrett asked. “Having a daughter myself, I’d never want to do it either.”

He told them everything and the Fierces laughed. “We feel your pain,” Grant said. “Leave it to us for now. We’ll work on Chloe and you can just pretend you have no knowledge of anything. We’ll keep you informed if we hear anything, but you’re off the hook.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I’ll keep you up to date if I see or hear anything, but it’s just not happening.”

Maybe he was wrong and the Fierces could pull this off, but he was losing hope fast.

KNOW THE BASICS

““**T**hanks for helping me with this,” Chloe said to Royce Monday night. He’d managed to get a hold of Zander, explain what was going on and find out if they could meet. He’d kept it simple that Chloe was a friend and Zander wouldn’t ask more anyway.

He’d rearranged as much of his schedule as he could to get out on time for this, as he wasn’t missing it for anything.

They’d just pulled into the parking lot for Zander’s office. It was in an older big building downtown, on the second floor. He supposed they were lucky to find a parking spot in the back of the shared lot, but maybe it was because it was the end of the day.

“I wouldn’t have you come alone,” he said. “It worked out good to meet now. I was done for the day mainly.”

“You’ll go home and get some work done like you always do,” she said, smirking at him. She didn’t seem to mind it or so she said, but he wasn’t always so sure.

“I’m sure you do the same at times,” he said.

“I do. It’s hard to shut it off, but I do try.”

They got out of his truck and then walked around the front of the building, found the door for Zander’s place, went inside,

and climbed the stairs.

“He could do with some sprucing up here,” she said. “He knows a contractor.”

Royce laughed. “Zander is pretty handy, but I’m sure he’s busy doing other things.”

They opened the front door and there was a woman putting her jacket on and looking as if she was getting ready to leave for the day. “Chloe Grey?” the woman asked.

“That’s me.”

“He’s on the phone if you just want to have a seat. He knows you’re coming.”

They watched the woman leave and he and Chloe took a seat. It wasn’t even five minutes later that his high school buddy came out, jeans and a flannel shirt on over a T-shirt. The two of them were dressed pretty much the same.

“Royce,” Zander said. “Good to see you again.” Zander moved over to his girlfriend. At least in his mind that is what Chloe was, but it’s not like he could say it to anyone else yet. “Chloe, nice to meet you. Royce told me a bit of what you’re looking for. Come into my office and I can get some more information.”

They stood up and moved into Zander’s office and took a seat. “I appreciate the short notice meeting.” She handed over the letter with the information on it. “This is a copy of what I received. I know Emily is a nurse and not much more. She gave me up for adoption when I was a few days old. I haven’t thought of her for years and didn’t care all that much. I just want to know something about her before I decide if I want to reach out.”

“Should be easy enough,” Zander said. “A few hours of work at most. You just want to know the basics, right?”

“Yes,” she said. “Let’s start with that. There is part of me that wants to know what I might be getting into if I decide to reach out more.”

“My secretary got your information from you the other day,” Zander said. “Give me a week or so and I’ll get you something.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “I’m not in a huge hurry. It’s waited this long and can continue to for now.”

Royce looked at Chloe. She seemed calm and fine with this, but he wondered how much of it was a front.

“Chloe, do you mind waiting for me in the truck? I just want to talk to Zander for a minute,” he said.

“Sure,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Just a friend, huh?” Zander asked him.

“Something like that,” he said.

“How did you two meet?” Zander asked. “I don’t know that I’ve ever known you to have women friends. And the way she just looked at you was that of an annoyed girlfriend.”

He laughed. “We met through work. She’s an engineer at Fierce. We’ve been doing a lot of work together for years but more so in the past year.”

“Ahh,” Zander said. “Close quarters.”

“If it’s something bad you find out, can you let me know first?” he asked. “I just want to be with her when she gets the information.”

“She’s the client, Royce,” Zander said. “You know that.”

“I want you to bill me, but I know if I say that and she finds out I’m going to have a bigger headache than the fact I just asked her to give us a few minutes.”

Zander laughed. “How long have you been pretending you don’t have a thing for her?”

Since Chloe was in the car there was no reason to really hide this. “We are seeing each other but keeping it quiet. It’s a long complicated story. I know I can trust you.”

“Always,” Zander said. “And so she doesn’t rip you apart or want to know what we were talking about, how is your father doing? You can say we talked about family.”

He grinned. “He’s good and annoying at the same time. Part of the reason we are keeping this all quiet. Work is busy. Or keeping us all busy.”

“I heard about that big building of yours.” Zander looked around his old office. “Don’t suppose there are any small spaces for rent? I’ve got to imagine it’s filling up with big companies.”

“I can find out for you,” he said. “Most of that is done by Olson’s. That’s the law firm that we are partnered with.”

“Thanks,” Zander said. “This place is falling down around me. Betsy can’t stand it and I don’t want to lose her because she doesn’t want to come into this place daily.”

He knew Betsy was the secretary that just left. She seemed older than them but not old enough to be their parent. Probably ten years or so, but he knew how hard it was to find good staff too. Which seemed to be the crux of his problems. Or the fact they just had too much work going on at once.

“This was a good topic to have without Chloe around too. Maybe she’ll cut me some slack,” he said, laughing.

“I don’t think that will happen, but that’s on you. It’s easy to not be dragged down and do my own thing.”

“I used to think the same way,” he said. “Chloe too. It gets old after a while.”

Zander laughed and shook his hand. “If you say so.”

Royce left and made his way to his truck, Chloe sitting there on her phone, her toe tapping that he could see. “Sorry about that,” he said.

“You better not have told him to bill you,” she said.

“And have to deal with your wrath?” he asked.

“That’s right. I’m fully capable of taking care of this on my own. I appreciate you putting me in contact with your friend and all, but I can deal with my own life.”

“I know you can,” he said, sighing. “You’ve told me plenty of times. In this case, he asked about my father. I told you we go way back. Then he wanted to know about some space in the commercial building for an office. I told him we were friends when I set this up. He didn’t know what to say in front of you.”

“Oh,” she said. “That place was pretty depressing.”

“I told him I’d find out what was available. He doesn’t need much space. It’s possible we might have something on one of the floors that no one else wants or didn’t need. My father will have a better idea or I’ll have him reach out to the Olsons. I just don’t have time to do it personally.” It was nice to be able to hand something off to someone else.

“How close were you two in school?” she asked.

“Close enough and considering his profession he was fast to ask if we were more than friends. I wasn’t lying but told

him to keep it quiet and didn't say much more. You can trust him."

She let out a sigh. "It's fine. I think we are getting into a situation where this isn't going to be as easy as we thought to keep up the charade."

"No," he said. "And I'm hungry. I don't suppose we can go to eat out in public or would you rather just get some subs or something and go back to your place?"

She didn't hesitate long before she said, "We can go eat somewhere. It's fine. I'm hungry too and it's not much faster than to get something and drive back anyway."

"Do you care where we go?" he asked. He was happy that she was willing to be seen out with him.

"Nope. Wherever you want to go is fine with me."

He decided to head toward her place. There were plenty of restaurants on the way and he found one and pulled in. A Monday night at six thirty wasn't that busy and they got right in.

An hour later they were driving back to her place. "Do you want me to come in?" he asked. "You've been quiet."

"I'm okay," she said. "I guess I'm still trying to figure out what is going on in my head. I didn't think I'd ever be in this place wanting to know these details and yet here I am."

"I know," he said. "But it could all be fine. You are in control even if it doesn't feel that way."

"Easier said than done," she said. "I know there are worse things in life for other people too. Yes, I'll be fine. I really do appreciate you going with me. I could have done it alone."

“You can do anything, I know that,” he said. “But I wanted to be there with you.”

She reached her hand over and picked his up that was on the seat next to him. She threaded their fingers together. “We should have planned for you to come and stay the night. Or me to stay the night with you. I guess I was distracted. You can come in if you want though.”

“Only if you want me to,” he said.

“I always want you to,” she said, laughing. “I feel like I’m a slut saying that. I’m not sure I ever wanted sex as much as I do with you. Unless it’s because it’s this secret private thing that makes it sexier.”

He laughed and shut the truck off. The two of them got out. “For me it’s all about you, nothing more.”

“For someone who said he didn’t know how to be around women or what to say, you do a pretty good job of it,” she said.

“Must be you are bringing it out of me,” he said.

They got to her apartment and barely got in the door before she had his back against the wall and was tugging his shirt out of his pants. Yeah, he’d never grow tired of this.

TURNED TO SOMETHING ELSE

““**Y**ou’ve got some explaining to do.”

Chloe looked up from her computer and saw Raina standing in the doorway the next morning. “What?”

Raina shut the door and moved closer to her desk. “You’re dating Royce and not telling anyone.”

Shit. How was it possible they were found out? Or could Raina be playing with her?

“What are you talking about?” she asked. She was going to hold off as much as she could at this point.

“Cody and I were out to eat last night. I saw you two in the back. I went to go to the bathroom. I recognized you first and saw you weren’t alone. You didn’t see me,” Raina said. “But I saw you. And you were smiling and laughing like a woman having a great time on a date.”

She let out a sigh. Before she could say anything else, there was a knock on her door and it opened up and Megan was standing there. “Sorry,” Megan said. “I just thought you might be alone. What am I missing?”

Chloe looked back and forth between her two friends and knew one couldn’t know without the other. There was no way

out of this, and though she felt trapped, she was starting to realize that this was going to happen.

Elise knew. Then Zander figured it out last night.

If anyone could understand why she wanted this kept quiet it would be the two women in this room.

“Take a seat, ladies,” she said.

“Chloe is just about to tell us that she is dating Royce,” Raina said.

“I knew it,” Megan said, pointing her finger and laughing. “You’ve got the look of a woman getting laid a lot lately and I’ve wanted to say something but figured you’d let us know when you wanted to.”

Guess she didn’t do that good of a job hiding anything. “Is it that obvious?” she asked.

“Maybe only to us since we know you well,” Megan said. “I don’t think the Fierces know. Or at least Grant and Garrett.”

“Ryder suspects it,” Raina said. “He’s brought it up a few times, but I have nothing to give him. He thinks it’s funny if you are playing with his father and uncle. Jade has suspected it too.”

“Jesus,” Chloe said. “I never expected this to happen. I’ll catch you two up to date, but don’t think ill of me.”

Megan waved her hand. “No one is going to think ill of you if you wanted to get a piece of a hot body.”

“It started out that way,” she said.

“Really?” Raina asked. “Just sex?”

She filled them in on how it all came about. That Royce had no idea what was going on and the three of them laughed.

Her proposition and then the ground rules.

“So you see, it was one thing and now has turned to something else.”

“It seems to be working,” Megan said. “You look happy.”

“I am,” she said. She didn’t tell them about Emily though. Nothing with her family. For now that was staying out of it. This was about her and Royce. “But I want to keep it quiet. They are going to gloat. Even Royce’s father is in on it, but he’s given up.”

“I don’t think anyone ever gives up,” Megan said. “It is funny though. Once again they know what they are doing and it’s just waiting for everything to fall in place.”

“I’m not so sure about that. It’s been a few months.”

“New Year’s Eve,” Megan said. “I can’t believe you two were planning this all along around the holidays and no one caught on. Then that night you went back to his house.” Megan was shaking her head and grinning. “Damn, I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking a bow at her desk. “Now that you are all caught up, was there something else you guys needed?”

“I didn’t,” Raina said. “I saw you two out and had to say something. Because if I saw it, other people are going to and it’s going to get out.”

“I know,” she said. “It’s getting hard to keep this a secret and at this point I’m not sure why we are trying.”

“Because it’s working and you don’t want to change that dynamic,” Megan said. “I get that. Trust me, I do.”

“That is a big part of it for sure,” she said. “I think we are both aware of it and will work to make sure it doesn’t change. Then I’m asking myself if I’m being selfish or not thinking that.”

How many times in her life had her parents told her that? She was selfish and put herself first.

She didn’t try to be. Even with as much as Royce was working, there was part of her that wanted to be with him more but would never ask. He didn’t need that on his shoulders.

Besides, she was fully aware that was one of the reasons he was single and why they went into this relationship the way they had.

“No,” Raina said. “You’re entitled to feel the way you are. I wasn’t thrilled I was being set up either at first.”

“I didn’t have a problem with it,” Megan said, grinning. “But I did see Jonah first.”

“Royce and I have worked together for a few years. So yeah, I’m not sure if we were on their radar or not until recently.”

She had thought of that too but then told herself to not get bogged down with it.

“I don’t put anything past them,” Raina said. “Maybe it’s just taking longer than they thought. Who knows? I’m not sure *they* even know.”

“They act like they’ve got it all together,” she said. “But it’s anyone’s guess.”

“I’m glad it’s working out for you,” Megan said. “Funny how we all fell for it.”

Chloe snorted. “We’ll see,” she said. “For now I’m just going on with my life like normal and not letting them be aware of what is happening in my personal life.”

“We’ll have your back,” Raina said.

She watched as her two friends left her office and then got back to work.

If she thought there would have been bad feelings over them not knowing, she was happy to say that didn’t exist.

She picked up her phone and sent a text to Royce. Might as well let him know that two more people were added to the list of their secret. At some point they’d have to decide when they’d make it more official.

She tossed her phone back down and went back to work. She’d hear from Royce when he had time. Sometimes it wasn’t until late at night and she was fine with that.

It was better than always worrying and waiting for communication. Guess there was someone out there for everyone and it’d just taken her a long time to find it.

Most women would hate this, but she was fine with it. She felt she was getting the best of both worlds. Her space and a hot guy.

Damn it. It was sounding like it was about her again. Geez.

At lunch, her phone rang when she was walking back to her office. She’d gotten up and spent thirty minutes with Raina and Megan. It was nice to get away from her desk.

When she looked down she saw it was Dane calling her and answered right away. It wasn’t like him to call her and she wondered if something was wrong.

“Hey,” she said. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” he said. “I had a quick break and I wanted to check in on you. It’s been a bit since you got the letter from Emily. I know you talked to Mom and Dad. I wanted to see how you were feeling about it all.”

She used to fill him in on so much in her life when she was younger. But then he was busy in college and she was going about her life too and didn’t want to bother him. Once Melanie was in the picture, she kept her distance too.

“I decided to look into her a bit more. I want to know what I’m getting into. I’m not sure I can shut the box now regardless. It’s better to know more before I reach out. If I do.”

“Do you need any help?” Dane asked. “Anything I can do?”

“No. A friend of mine recommended a PI and I went to see the guy last night. He’s going to do some basic research. Things I can’t find. Hopefully there isn’t anything horrible to find out, but I need to know that.”

“I understand. If you need help with this,” Dane said, “let me know. Maybe I’ll consider him doing it for me too.”

“What?” she asked. “Why?”

He sighed. “I don’t know. Just a thought. I didn’t want you to be in this alone.”

“I’m not,” she said. This was where she actually felt bad that the one person who had her back her whole life didn’t know what was going on in her personal life.

But she reminded herself she didn’t always fill him in on her dating life either and this wasn’t much different.

She wasn’t lying. Royce was a friend first and became her boyfriend later.

“Are you sure?” Dane asked.

“I am. Money isn’t an issue either.”

“I know,” Dane said. “I’m here if you need me. Just remember that.”

“I will. Thanks, Dane.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked.

“I’m great. I really am.”

She hung up the phone and realized that, yes, she really was. Or she was getting there.

And to prove it, she texted her boyfriend to let him know she wanted another date tonight. Not out, but at his house.

Private. Just the two of them.

But something fun.

She needed some fun in her life now.

THE SHOCK FACTOR

““**Y**ou’re in a good mood,” Royce said to her later that night. “I wasn’t sure what to expect when you said Raina and Megan found out.”

“I didn’t know how I’d react, but there was some relief with it too,” she said.

“That’s good,” he said. “I know you aren’t ready to announce it to anyone and, to be honest, that’s not my style.”

“Mine either,” she said. “We’ll have to figure that out when the time comes. I’m all for the shock factor.”

He laughed. He wasn’t sure what to make of that. “Meaning what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe walking over and giving you a big kiss in front of everyone.”

He pulled her toward him. “That sounds like fun, but for now we can push it from our minds.”

“I can do that,” she said. “I know I said I wanted a date tonight so it’s all in this bag. And I appreciate you accommodating me, as I know you’re busy. We’d said before that we wouldn’t have expectations last minute and here I went and did that.”

That was the last thing he wanted her to say. She wanted to see him and she didn't ask for much and he was damn well going to make it work.

"And I made the time easily," he said. Besides, that was their agreement before. It was different now. He smelled something spicy but wasn't sure what was going on with her plans. "What's that?"

"Chicken wings," she said. "Two dozen, different flavors and you've got beer. Upstairs you've got darts and a pool table. Sounds like a great date to me."

"Shit yeah," he said. Never in a million years did he think he'd find a woman that would think that was an ideal date. And this was another part of the reason he had no problem shifting things for her. It's like she was giving him something he needed without knowing.

"I've got clothes for tomorrow. I hope it wasn't too forward of me to plan on staying the night?"

He saw the uncertainty in her eyes and hated it. "No. Never. You can't have a beer with me if you are worried about driving. And since we are going to have some games upstairs, maybe we can have a few wagers."

"Now you're talking my language." She was rubbing her hands together. "What did you have in mind?" she asked.

"I guess we'll figure it out as we go," he said.

She walked to his room and put her clothes away. He'd even given her a drawer she could use last time. He got some plates and napkins out and grabbed two beers. Nah, he grabbed a four pack and would put it in the fridge he had up there anyway.

He'd had time to shower before she showed up and she was in jeans herself, so she must have changed at home when she went to get her clothes.

"I'm starving," she said. "And wings are meant to be messy. So don't laugh at me."

"Me laugh at you?" he said. "I'm the one that was dropping food on me when we had our first lunch together."

She started to laugh. "I completely forgot about that. You're right. But I haven't seen you do that again. Must be I made you nervous."

He'd never been nervous around women that much in his life. Just because he felt like he didn't talk to them well didn't mean he was nervous about it all though.

But with Chloe he felt as if he had a lot more control than he had in the past. It was a nice feeling.

"It's your smoking good looks," he said.

Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, her eyes clear as day with a tiny bit of smoky arousal staring at him.

Her cheeks had a blush to them that he found sexy and innocent at the same time.

"Then we complement each other," she said. "Let's eat and then we can play some pool. What do you think about strip pool or darts?"

"You can't be this perfect," he said, shaking his head. Maybe that was where the blush was coming from. She knew what she had planned for the night.

"I most certainly can be," she said, laughing at him.

She was fluttering her eyelashes at him. She pulled the plates out and put some wings on hers and he opened two beers and handed them over. “Do you want a glass?”

“Nah,” she said. “I can drink it out of the can. It’s fine. I’m not that high maintenance.”

Thank God was all he could think, but he could go get her a glass too. “I don’t do well with high maintenance women.”

“That is your mother talking,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m not trying to be mean, but you do well with me. I don’t think I’m a tomboy or anything either.”

“No,” he said. They started to eat their wings, both of them with napkins all around them. “My mother would never be caught dead eating dinner like this, and to me, you can’t get much better.”

“The same,” she said. “I’ve eaten like this a few times when I’m alone. Life is about fun.”

“And we are going to have some of that tonight while I kick your butt in pool.”

They finished off about a dozen wings and a beer each and then cleaned up their hands and went to the pool table.

“Rack them up,” she said, wiggling her hips at him. She was just pure evil.

“So how are we doing this? Loser has to ditch an article of clothing? We could be here a while if we do it for each game.”

“How about for every two balls one of us sinks, the other has to take something off. Winner is going to have eight balls so that is four articles of clothing the other takes off.”

“That works,” he said. One of them would be down to their undergarments after the first game at this rate. Socks, pants

and a shirt.

He got the balls all set up. "I'll break," she said. "You know, ladies first."

It was the look in her eyes that told him he might be up against a shark right now, but he was looking forward to it. They'd both be winners in the end, he was sure.

She lined up the cue ball and pulled the stick back, then let it go, sending it flying across the green felt, the balls scattering everywhere, the orange five going into the far left hand pocket. "Looks like you are solids," he said.

He sat there and watched her sink the yellow one in the middle right hand side easily. "That's two in a row. Remove something. Do I get to pick?"

"No," he said. "Socks first. Then top, then bottoms."

"You've got some nice big feet. It's all good," she said. She walked around the table, chalking up her stick and eyeing her next shot. "Do we have to go in order or just solids and stripes?"

"I'm laid back. Solid and stripes works," he said, sipping his beer, one sock on and one off. The faster they got sunk the sooner he could sink into her.

She leaned over the table, her ass in the air and he knew she was just pulling him along tonight and all those worries he had she might be upset her friends found out about them were long gone.

She wanted fun tonight and he was damn well going to give it to her.

After she sank two more shots, he was barefoot and taking his turn. He'd gotten two in, so she lost a sock, but he missed

his third shot.

They went back and forth a bit more missing shots, but then she got on a run and his shirt was off, and she was one shot away from his pants following and the eight ball going in.

She'd know how turned on he was when his jeans came off. He should have brought a condom up now that he thought of it. He could run down and get one. They still had time.

"I'm ready to take this game," she said. Her eyes were roaming over his body. "You've got a nice chest if I've never said it before. All that hard work you do with your hands."

"I don't do as much as I used to," he said.

"You do enough. And then you come here and work out," she said. She was stalking him and the table. Her finger moving over his chest and then down to the button on his jeans. She reached into her pocket and pulled a condom out. "For when we are ready. Lots of room up here."

"There is," he said.

She leaned over the table this time, lined up her stick, pulled back and let it fly, banking it off the side and sinking the eight. "Time to lose the jeans," she said. "Then you rack them up and break this time."

The last thing he expected was that he'd be walking around playing pool in his boxer briefs with a massive hard on. He wasn't going to feel self-conscious over it either. Of course if he was naked doing it, it might be another thing.

Somehow either her luck ran out or she was letting him take some wins because she was slipping her bra off now and they both had on their underwear.

“Looks like it’s a tie,” he said. “Do we finish this game or just put ourselves out of our misery?”

“I’m not in misery,” she said, moving closer to him. “But we can call it that if you want.”

She had the condom in her hand from where it was sitting on the table, her fingers running over it like it was a prop in a magic show.

“Let’s call it,” he said, moving toward her and picking her up. He set her on the table, her legs hanging off, his fingers going to the lace panties and inching them down when she shifted for him some.

“I don’t want to get your table dirty,” she said.

“I don’t give a fuck.” He dropped his underwear down and grabbed the condom, opened it up and covered himself.

She leaned back on her hands on the table, her legs opening up. He stepped right in between, found her opening and sank in just as fast as she’d been running the table tonight and working him up.

He moved into her more, his mouth going for hers, his hands on the table too for support, the two of them kissing fiercely as his hips pumped in and out of her.

Her legs went up and around his back, and she was almost lying across the green felt this time. A ball went rolling by his arm and he was pretty sure she must have hit it while she was adjusting herself because her fingers were now in his hair and holding on.

The faster he plunged into her, the more her hips lifted to meet and retreat.

“That’s it,” she said. “Just like that.”

His hands went under her ass and lifted her up so she was arched off the table as he slammed into her again and again, the table starting to shift some. If it crashed to the ground he wouldn't give one shit.

“You're mine, you know that, right?”

“I do,” she said.

He could feel all the tension in his body getting ready to uncoil and lash out. He wasn't sure the last time he'd said someone was his.

No. He'd never said it. He wasn't even shocked he was saying it to her.

When her nails started to mark his back, he felt the burn and something more. Something he wasn't going to say though. Neither one of them was ready for it and he'd have to be happy with what he'd gotten so far.

Her head went back and she started to chant out his name. The minute he felt her muscles starting to squeeze his dick everything let loose and exploded inside of him, draining all the energy he had.

He all but collapsed on the table but then rolled so that he was on his back. “Wow,” he said.

“We both won tonight,” she said. “But I think I need a shower. My back is burning too.”

He sat up and pulled her up and looked at her back to see the red marks and some green felt stuck to her skin. “Sorry about that,” he said. “I guess we got a little carried away.”

“And then some,” she said. “But totally worth it. Next time we'll try darts though and then do it against the wall.”

“Works for me,” he said, picking her up. “Time to clean up and get in bed.”

“Are you going to tuck me in?”

“If you want me to,” he said.

“I want you to do what you want to me,” she said and laid her head on his shoulder. If that wasn’t a vulnerable move by her, he didn’t know what was.

GOOD ENOUGH FOR HER

““**T**hanks for meeting me here,” Zander said to Royce ten days later. “I know you’re swamped and have bigger projects than this and that you don’t always even do this part of it. If it works out and you don’t get to me until the summer that is fine. I’d just like to be in before the end of the year.”

“That works,” Royce said. “My father and the Fierces are meeting us here too. You know my father would love to see you again and the Fierces have to do all the work. They could just send over one of their engineers.”

Yeah, he didn’t bring clients here. Never. He didn’t come in until it was a done deal. This was really his father’s part of the business to manage at this stage. It wasn’t like he was a personal partner or anything. The business was and he just couldn’t handle this on top of everything else.

If he was already here and asked to come up for a few questions, that was one thing, but today he was going out of his way because it was a friend, and then they were meeting Chloe later.

Just more rearranging of his schedule, but he was getting used to doing that too.

“Chloe,” Zander said, winking at him.

“She does most of it, but there are two others doing work too. One floor is a massive project so Chloe did a lot of the work with Drake Fierce for that.”

“What’s the deal with you two? You said no one knows so I won’t say anything if she shows up. But wouldn’t you know if she was going to be here?” Zander asked.

“She’ll text me if she is. I haven’t heard from her so I’m going to guess no, but things can change last minute. The Fierces and my father have been trying to set me up with Chloe for years. I didn’t know until she said something a few months ago. She didn’t even realize it either.”

“So it worked,” Zander said. “Why keep it quiet?”

“I don’t like someone else controlling my life,” he said. “No one knows it worked. It’s a long story.”

“I get it,” Zander said. “I do. And you’re dying to know what I found out about Chloe’s birth mother, aren’t you?”

He sighed. “You said you’ve got information and wanted to meet with her tonight.”

Chloe had told him Zander called her a few days ago and asked if they could meet. They were going to dinner tonight. The three of them. In his eyes it worked out well and he could maybe play it off as a work dinner after this meeting, but he was more concerned with just being there for Chloe more than anything else.

His old buddy wasn’t giving anything away right now on what he found though.

“I do. We’ll all find out tonight,” Zander said, laughing. “And lookie there, here comes your girlfriend and she is

alone.”

He turned and saw Chloe coming in the front door. He was waiting in the hallway with Zander for the Fierces and his father to show up. There was space on the second floor that would meet Zander’s needs for an office and storage area. Just about eight hundred square feet and more than enough. He didn’t even need a bathroom and could use the one in the hallway, he’d said. It’d keep the costs down on construction and rent. Zander had always been a simple guy.

“You didn’t tell me you were coming,” he said when Chloe reached them.

“I was in another meeting and wasn’t sure I’d get out on time. I told Grant and Garrett I’d meet them here if I could. I didn’t want to tell you if I couldn’t make it. It’s nice to see you again, Zander.”

“You too, Chloe. Royce was just filling me in on your bosses.”

“Oh, really?” she asked. “You mean how sneaky they are?”

Zander laughed. “I didn’t hear that part. Maybe you’d like to share that over dinner later?”

“It’d take more than one dinner for that,” she said, grinning.

The three of them laughed and his father walked in at that moment. “We are almost all here. I know Grant and Garrett are on the way. Zander, so good to see you again.”

“You too, Richard,” Zander said.

“And how is life treating you?” his father said. “You still single like my son here or have you settled down and gotten a wife and some kids?”

Royce looked at his father, then Chloe and finally Zander and shook his head. It was never going to end, he realized.

“No wife or woman. Haven’t found out about any kids yet, but you know, that is always a possibility.”

“You did like to joke about those things,” his father said. “Your mother would kill you and you know it.”

“She probably expects no differently,” Zander said.

“Did Royce introduce you to Chloe?” his father said. “She’s a gem, all right. You two might have some things in common. I’d thought maybe she’d hit it off with Royce, but I realize now there is no way. My boy isn’t good enough for her.”

His father winked, Chloe blushed, and he fought back the scowl. Maybe he had those doubts in his head with his limited availability so that statement burned hotter than it should. His father was still working on it, but it scorched just the same.

Zander slapped him on the back. “I did meet her. She is pretty sweet on the eyes and all, but I’m probably not good enough for her either.”

“Really, gentlemen,” Chloe said. “You’re talking like I’m some goddess and we know I’m not,” she said, grinning at them, but her eyes landed on Royce and stayed a fraction longer.

“Yes, she is,” Grant said, moving closer as he’d heard that statement when he opened the door. “I want to say queen of my office, but then that would be Jade and if she found out we gave that title to someone else, there’d be hell to pay.”

“Now you guys are all making my head swell,” she said. “Can you tell my parents how great I am? They don’t seem to

think so. You know, like you two men, seems I can't quite settle down."

She was playing with her bosses and Royce couldn't help but smile. Maybe he needed it after the statement his father threw out there.

"You'll find your man," Garrett said. "We'd offered to help her, but she's pretty adamant she has this on her own."

This was getting out of hand and he had to put an end to it before he slipped. "I'm sure Zander is busy if we can show him the space and see what he thinks."

"I've got time," Zander said. Damn, his buddy was enjoying this. But at least Zander would understand what he was battling here and why they were keeping it quiet. "I was hoping if it worked out we could get some dinner after this and discuss some things."

"A man after my own heart," Richard said. "Maybe Chloe wouldn't mind going if she doesn't have plans."

"I'd hate to take you away from anything or anyone," Grant said. "But if you have plans, I'm sure you and Royce could meet up another time with Zander."

"No plans tonight that can't be changed," she said. "If it works out for Zander."

The group of them went to the second floor and looked at the space that would be for Zander's office. His friend knew what he wanted and agreed it worked for him. The Olsons had already talked rates with him prior to construction so things were falling into place.

"I'm pretty simple," Zander said. "I know you've got some big projects ahead of me. I told Royce as long as I'm in by the end of the year I'm fine."

“You’ll be in before that,” Richard said.

“I’ve got space now until the end of the year,” Zander said. “So no rush if you need to finish other projects.”

“That helps,” Royce said. “As you can tell, it’s just open space so you can let us know what you’re looking for and Chloe can get that down when she has time and get approval for it from you. When we are getting close you can talk with Elise about finishings for the floors and walls. You said you wanted a small kitchen.”

“That is a must over the private bathroom,” Zander said. “Just something to warm up food more than anything. Betsy will be fussier than me and I’ll let her deal with that stuff.”

“Betsy?” Richard asked.

“My assistant,” Zander said. “I’m doing this for her. She can’t stand the office we are in and has threatened to leave a few times if I don’t fix it. I think coming into a new space should make up for her suffering for years with cracked walls and drafty windows.”

“At the very least,” Grant said. “You won’t have that problem here.”

“I’ll know who to call if I do,” Zander said, looking at Royce.

They all took their leave after. It was close to four and no reason for him to go to work at this point even though he had a shit ton to do. Chloe was leaving for the day too. “Is it too early to meet now?” he asked. “After my father and Chloe’s bosses put it out there for us.”

“Seems like it worked out well,” Zander said. “There’s a pub around the corner. I’m in the mood for a beer and burger.”

“That works for me,” she said.

He could see Chloe seemed almost nervous and wished they were driving together so he could find out what was going on but realized that she wouldn't want that either.

They got to the parking lot of the pub and Chloe parked next to him. He walked to her and grabbed her hand. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah. I've been trying to put this from my mind all day, but it's been hard. I can't get a read on your friend to know if what he found was bad or not.”

“I don't think so,” he said.

She frowned at him. “Did you ask before I got there?”

He knew she'd get pissed, but he couldn't help it. “I did. He wouldn't tell me so don't worry. And whatever it is, we'll get through. Remember, you don't have to reach out to Emily. You did this to find out the facts first and foremost.”

“I know,” she said. “I told myself that all afternoon too. I think I figured since it took so long maybe there was a lot to find out.”

“Or not,” he said. “Zander could have been busy. Or he could have been looking and finding nothing and just wanted to double-check he didn't miss anything. You're not going to know until we talk to him.”

She squeezed his hand quickly. “Thanks. I'm normally reasonable and not sure why I'm not right now. At least my bosses and your father kept us entertained. It was pretty funny they were trying to get me to see Zander as a single guy.”

“Yeah, real funny,” he said.

Royce knew that Dane had asked her what was going on and Chloe admitted to having Emily looked into but nothing more. Not that she was dating him or that he was the one that recommended Zander.

He told himself they would get to the next stage and just had to be content with where they were now.

Zander pulled in and they waited for him, then went inside.

Once they were seated and drinks ordered, Zander started. "First off, there isn't a lot to report. I spent some time really looking deep and I found nothing to raise any flags."

He saw Chloe let out a breath. "Okay. Guess that is good. What did you find out then?"

"Emily Bask is Emily Nichols. She's a nurse, as you already know. She married about twenty-five years ago. Her husband, Curt, works for the post office as a supervisor. He's been there since out of high school when he started as a carrier."

"Okay. A federal job," Royce said. "So he has to keep his life somewhat clean, right?"

"To a point, yes," Zander said. "But he has. They've got two kids. A daughter, Crystal, who is twenty-two and a son, Corbin, who is twenty. Both are in college right now. As you know, they live in Raleigh, not that far. At least Emily and Curt do. They've got no criminal records. Clean drivers' licenses. No tickets, nothing. They are your everyday average middle class family just blending into life."

"Hmm," she said. "I guess I didn't expect that. I'm not sure what I expected. She was sixteen when she was pregnant and gave me up."

“Emily’s parents are still alive. Her father works for the State doing work on the highway department. Her mother works at a lawyer’s office and has been there for thirty-five years. She’s a paralegal. Again, middle class family.”

“I wonder why they didn’t want to raise me?” she said quietly.

“Hey,” he said. “Don’t think that. You don’t know anything other than she was young and her parents wanted her to give you up. Maybe there was more going on back then and until you talk to someone, you have no idea.”

“I know,” she said. “At least it’s nothing bad. And nothing on who my birth father might be?”

“No,” Zander said. “It’s not listed and I’ve got no way of finding out at the moment. This was just a surface check for you.”

“It’s good. I’m glad you found what you did. I appreciate it. At least it helps if I decide to reach out. There is a lot of curiosity now, but I have to decide if I want this in my life or not.”

“Just like Dane said, you can’t close the box, but that doesn’t mean you have to open it wide either,” Royce said.

“No,” she said. “And no reason to talk about it anymore tonight. Let’s at least get some notes on your office space, Zander, and then you can tell me what Royce was like as a teen.”

He grinned. “Or not,” Royce said.

“I’d love to do that,” Zander said. “He’s a lot smoother now than he was back then if he landed you.”

“I’d like to think we landed each other,” she said.

“Yeah,” Royce said. “That sounds much better.”

LET HIM KNOW

Her relationship with Royce wasn't the only secret she had to worry about over two weeks later.

The bun in the oven she hadn't been paying attention to was going to be drawing some eyes to her at some point.

Between the stress of Emily's letter, then talking to Zander and waiting on information, she hadn't realized she'd been two weeks late with her period. But now two weeks after she found out what she had about Emily, she really couldn't put it off any longer.

She had a pregnancy test in her bag and she was going to talk to Royce when he woke up. She was lying in bed with a full bladder next to him and knew she should go take it now, but there was part of her that said she needed to let him know.

What started out as fun and games had turned into so much more and she was thrilled with the way things were going.

It was almost like he was perfect for her. She knew he hated all the time he spent working and not with her, but she was fine with it. It allowed her to have the best of both worlds. Did she think that was selfish, hearing her mother's words in her ear? Yeah, she did.

Too bad. It was working for them.

Not letting too many know about their relationship wasn't a big deal in her eyes. At least it hadn't been.

But once she found out the results of her test, it was going to be interesting to tell her family she was having a baby when they didn't even know she had a boyfriend.

Here she'd been all embarrassed and worried about what some might think of her having a friends with benefits relationship with Royce and now...well, this might be worse in terms of bad decisions or embarrassment.

What was it her mother said to her over a month ago? Emily had made a mistake getting pregnant at sixteen.

Here she was wondering if history was repeating itself.

No, she shouldn't think that.

She wasn't some naive sixteen-year-old girl that couldn't support herself or her child. She used birth control every single time, but shit happens.

Not only that, she had a guy in her life that she not only had fun with and respected but was slowly falling in love with.

Neither one of them signed up for love and romance though and she hadn't wanted to bring it up, liking what they had and the slow pace they were going.

But someone's foot was going to be hitting the gas soon she was sure.

She wouldn't know which one though. There were more important things to talk about first.

"Are you okay?"

She turned and saw Royce looking at her in bed. “Yes, why?”

“You just groaned.”

“I did?” she asked. She’d had no clue she had.

“Yes,” he said. “Do you feel sick?”

“No,” she said, moving the covers back. Her bladder was screaming and she didn’t want to waste this and it was recommended to take the test first thing in the morning. But to do that, she had to get it out of her purse which was on the chair across from the bed.

She got up and moved toward it. “What are you doing?” he asked. “Oh, never mind. One of those female things?”

She snorted. “No.” She took a deep breath and pulled it out and then turned and showed him. “I’ve got to pee really bad. We’ll talk when I get out. I promise.”

His face had paled and she wasn’t sure she liked that reaction but realized hers probably matched it.

She came out a few minutes later, leaving the test on the counter.

“Come sit down,” he said. “How long have you suspected this?”

“I feel like such an idiot,” she said, putting her head in her hands. “A few weeks now.”

“Why haven’t you said anything?” His hand came out and rubbed up and down her arm. At least he was giving her comfort and not running for the door. Well, it was his house so he wouldn’t do that.

“I’m four weeks late,” she said.

“Damn. I should have been around more for you to talk to me. Or for me to see it.”

Now he was running his hands over *his* face and she didn’t want that.

“No,” she said. “I’ve been in denial. Really.”

“Really?” he asked. “You just started to suspect it a few weeks ago?”

“I’ve never been regular. I mean I could be a week late and it didn’t matter. It’s not like I was having sex regularly. And we’ve been protected every time.”

“We have been, but that means nothing. Nothing is one hundred percent unless we don’t do it, I’m snipped, or you’re tied off. Neither of us is in that situation.”

She laughed. At least he was trying to crack a joke and not panicking like she was trying not to do. Unless it was forced bravado. Probably that.

“No, we aren’t. Between not thinking much of being late on and off, the letter from Emily, then looking into her. Work. I don’t know. Life got away from me. About two weeks ago I got thinking more time had passed than I realized and I tried to think back to when I had it last. It was the end of January.”

She knew that because she’d just gotten over her period before New Year’s Eve so that was what made it easier to have that be their first time together. She would have been pissed off if after all their planning she’d have to cancel on him for that reason.

Though she didn’t know the exact date, she knew the timeline and that helped.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s just see what this test says before we do anything else.”

“I know. I try to plan a lot in life and this isn’t planned at all. Most don’t even know we are dating and then I’m going to get fat soon.”

His hand dropped to her belly. “You’re not going to get fat. If you’re pregnant, my child is in there. That isn’t fat.”

“No,” she said. “Sorry. I’m a little irrational right now.”

“I understand. I might feel that way soon. Maybe I’m just trying to calm you. Or calm me? How long do you have to wait?”

At least she wasn’t alone in her crazy thoughts right now.

“I’m sure it’s done now. I just can’t seem to get my legs to move.”

“Do you want me to go get it?” he asked.

“I should do it,” she said. “Don’t you think?”

“We can do it together,” he said. “It seems to me we’ve done everything else together. I won’t look until I bring it back.”

“Sure,” she said.

She grabbed a pillow and hugged it to her belly. She knew deep down what it was going to say.

He returned with his hand over the test and sat next to her, then pulled it away.

The word “pregnant” was there and she felt her eyes fill up with tears. One by one they escaped down her face.

She turned to look at him. He didn’t seem upset, but he wasn’t smiling either.

He put the test down and pulled her into his arms and just held her. “It’s going to be fine. We’re in this together.”

“Friends, right?” she said. He stiffened and she realized that she said the wrong thing. She leaned back. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s more than that,” he said. “I thought we agreed a while ago it was.”

“It is,” she said. “Don’t hold words out of my mouth against me right now. I’m just reeling over this. So many things I’ve got to figure out and don’t know what to do.”

“One step at a time right now,” he said. “Let’s get up and shower. I’ll make some breakfast and we’ll feed the baby inside of you. We don’t need to talk much about it if you don’t want to. I mean you need to see a doctor first to verify, right?”

“Yes. That is smart. Not that I think this test is wrong. I think in my gut I had a feeling this would be the results.”

He kissed her on the forehead. “Thank you for telling me. For taking the test with me here.”

“I wouldn’t have done it any other way. That wouldn’t be right,” she said.

“Many wouldn’t feel that way,” he said. “It’s your choice to do it and could have sat on that information. I would have been pissed but not much I could do about it.”

“Why would you have been ticked off?” she asked.

“Because I wouldn’t want you stressing about this by yourself or dealing with it alone. I’m not asking you to come to some agreement right now. I know you with your ground rules and all.”

She laughed at the grin on his face. “Yeah. That got us in this mess.”

“Is it a mess?” he said softly. “I guess I’m not thinking that.”

She let out a sigh. “Again, words that don’t mean much. I told you how my mother used the word ‘mistake’ in regards to Emily. It’s hard to get that out of my head. And if they are going to be disappointed in me. I’ve never worried about that before or even cared, and yet now, I am.”

“They love you. I’m sure they might not be thrilled, but you’re not a kid. It’s not like you had a one-night stand either. You’re not alone, so remember that.”

She had to because she wanted to believe it.

Even if they didn’t work out, they could both be mature adults about this and raise this child the best way they could.

The problem was, she wanted to do it with him and yet couldn’t even bring herself to say it.

As he said, nothing had to be decided right yet.

Monday, she’d start with a doctor and then go from there.

“I know. Thank you for that. For reminding me. I don’t normally feel vulnerable and here I am.”

“I think we all feel it in our lives at some point,” he said. “Shower, then food. Then we’ll do whatever you want this weekend to take your mind off of it. I can think of one thing.”

She laughed at the adorable grin on his face. “What is that?”

“Well,” he said. “I don’t think we need to worry about condoms anymore...”

Screw it. This was one thing the two of them had first and she wanted to hold onto it.

She dove on him. “No, we don’t. Take my mind off of it now.”

“Gladly,” he said, rolling her over and lying on top of her, his mouth going to hers, and she held on tight because there was part of her that just didn’t want to ever let go.

EXCITEMENT WAS SETTING IN

Royce walked into his father's office Friday afternoon. He was meeting with Elise and his father and it wasn't going to be about work. He'd called this meeting and told them it wouldn't take long. It's not like he had a ton of time to give them anyway.

Chloe had been to the doctor a few days ago and it was confirmed and she had a due date of November first.

If the excitement was setting in he was keeping it to himself. He could see she was still on edge and nervous, but once they got their relationship out in the open it would be easier. Then the two of them could discuss about the future and he could be there for her more. Or at least work on a plan for it.

"Where is Elise?" he asked. He knew his sister was here, but she was normally in the office before him.

"She's on the phone," his father said. "She said she might be a few minutes late. She is dealing with vendors for the new house build."

"Yeah," he said. "Things are coming down to the wire for some of the builds and I'm over the last minute changes."

“That happens in construction,” his father said. “You know that. At least with the office building it isn’t happening as much. But I know you are stretched thin. We should sit down and figure out a schedule shift for oversight on everything. Or maybe look at promoting someone.”

Something to talk about. “The commercial building isn’t that bad with last minute changes because one of our partners are lawyers and they make sure nothing can change after a certain date. I have to admit I wasn’t sure how this relationship would work out when you brought it up over a year ago, but it’s been great.”

“It is,” his father said. “Good for business. Maybe too good with how busy it is and we haven’t even gotten into the crazy part of our season. We are making money on the work as we have to get paid for the supplies and labor at a discounted rate and then the rest gets built into the rent.”

“We are doing more work than any of the other partners,” he said. Which was what he had feared going in, that this would be lopsided. “So we are actually losing money if it were other clients.”

He didn’t play with the numbers all that much but knew how it worked. This was a long haul investment for them all. Elise was on top of it, so if she said it was working then he’d have to believe her.

“Sorry I’m late,” Elise said. “It’s that new build in the development. I told them last week we can’t make any more changes and the wife just called and said she changed her mind on the cabinet color. I said I’d try, but this was it.”

He was glad his sister dealt with it all. “Did you get it changed?”

“Yes. But I’m going to tell her how many strings I had to pull and no more. I can’t pull anymore anyway. I had to all but promise to name my firstborn after the rep to get it.”

His father laughed. “What’s the name?”

“Francis. I guess it could be either a boy or a girl, but I can’t stand it. I had to make nice though. Good thing there are no kids in my future to worry about it. What did you need to meet about, Royce?”

Figures his sister would crack a joke about that at this time.

“This isn’t work related,” he said. “I wanted you both to know that I’m dating someone.”

Elise started to laugh at him. “And who is this person?”

He rolled his eyes at Elise. He should have told her what he was going to do, but he’d talk to her later. “It’s Chloe Grey,” he said.

He looked at his father and was slightly shocked to see the fist pump. “Damn, Grant and Garrett were right once again.”

“No,” he said. “We didn’t need their help and I don’t want you even thinking it has to do with them.”

Elise just continued to laugh and he narrowed his eyes at her. “What’s the big deal?” his father said. “I guess I just can’t understand why it took so long.”

“First off, I know you’ve been in on it. So does Chloe. I’m not an idiot.”

“If anyone is an idiot, Dad,” Elise said, “it’s you.”

“What does that mean?” his father asked, frowning.

Elise wouldn't be able to keep quiet now. "Remember when Royce had someone at his house on New Year's Day? It was Chloe."

His father's jaw dropped. "How long have you been dating?"

He wasn't sure he could put a date to it and wasn't going to say since New Year's Eve because that would make them both not look favorably in his family's eyes.

"Early December or so," he said. "You don't expect me to know the exact date, do you?"

That at least seemed to pacify them. "But you two barely talked to each other at Diane's house on Christmas Eve and again on New Year's Eve," his father said.

"Because you've been having me watched by the Fierces," he said, narrowing his eyes.

"Well, you said you knew what they were doing," his father argued.

"I did and didn't care for it. Neither did Chloe. And to be honest, I didn't know at first. She knew and she told me when we went to lunch that one time. That lunch where you showed up without me knowing and I didn't expect her."

His father laughed. "Damn, they are good."

"Whatever," he said, waving his hand. There was no reason to get into it with him. He had other things to address anyway. "It doesn't matter. We got here on our own. It's been months and we wanted you to know."

"It seems Elise already did," his father said, frowning. As if it just occurred to him.

“Yep, I did,” Elise said. “You think you’re sneaky, but you’re not. I guessed it and told Royce I’d keep the secret and I did. I’m glad it’s not one anymore.”

“No,” he said. “But something else is.”

“What’s that?” his father asked.

“Chloe is pregnant.”

There was silence that greeted him with that. “I’m going to be a grandfather?” his father asked.

“I’m going to be an aunt?” Elise asked, jumping up and dancing in place and then sitting back down. “Oh my God. You knocked her up.”

He knew his sister was more excited over the baby than picking on him, but it sucked just the same to hear that.

“Not funny,” he said.

“It sounds like the truth,” his father said. “How do you feel about it? I’m assuming this is why you are telling us about your relationship now?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m fine with it. It was a surprise, but we’re in a good spot. We get along well. We respect each other. Things happen and this is just one of them. We’ll figure it out. She went to the doctor this week and is due November first.”

“Wow,” Elise said. “You work fast.”

He ignored his sister. “Regardless. The relationship won’t be a secret, but the baby will be. I’m asking you both to keep it to yourself until we let you know. That doesn’t mean you can’t talk to Chloe about it, but it doesn’t leave this room. Chloe is going to tell her parents tomorrow and is stressing the same thing.”

“As much as I want to let everyone know I’m going to be a grandfather, I’ll honor that.”

“Would it be too much to have a family dinner?” Elise asked. “We know her and all, but now that it’s out in the open, I’d like to be able to just talk to her in general.”

“I think she’d like that,” he said. “I’ll talk to her and get you a date. Probably not this weekend. She’s going to her mother’s tomorrow and then we’ll see what is going on.”

“You’re not going with her?” his father asked.

“No.” He wasn’t going to say that he offered, but she wanted to do it alone and since he was doing the same alone there wasn’t much he could say about it. “It’s her choice. Her parents don’t even know about the fact that the Fierces were trying to set her up. Maybe it was easier for you guys to accept because you know her.”

“All the more reason for you to be with her,” his father argued.

“We have to do things our way,” he stressed.

“Are you going to tell Mom?” Elise asked.

He hadn’t even thought of that. “At some point, but not now. No reason to. She’ll know before the baby is born though.”

His father laughed. “Your decision on that. What is the next step with you two? You’ve got a baby coming. You don’t live together. I’m not going to ask if you’re getting married or anything. That is old-fashioned thinking even for me.”

“We haven’t gotten that far,” he said. “She took a home test last weekend and went to the doctors a few days ago. We’ve got time yet. I’m sure we’ll have more figured out

before the baby arrives. If you're asking me if I plan on letting her be by herself, the answer is no. But I also know she isn't someone that can be pushed if she isn't ready."

The past several days he'd been thinking about their first conversation and how they were talking about why they wanted the friends with benefits situation.

She didn't like to compromise her time and space. She didn't like to be pressed or pushed to conform to the norm either. He didn't have time for someone and seemed to put his career first.

They were both going to have to figure this out and he was positive they would be able to.

"You're not someone that can be pushed either," Elise said. "Guess that makes you both good with the other."

"I'd like to think there are a lot of things that make us good for each other."

"Grant and Garrett have said that all along," his father said.

Not what he wanted to hear. "No gloating. It's the last thing we want to hear or deal with right now. I get it, there are going to be comments and we'll take them as they come."

"Chloe will be a good sport about it," his father said.

"She will be. So will I," he said. "If there isn't anything else, then I'm going to call it a day."

"Are you going to be with Chloe tonight?" Elise asked.

"Yes. We normally spend the weekends together," he said. "Unless there is an emergency with work, I need the time."

"I'll cover anything," his father said. "Go be with Chloe."

He left after that. He wasn't in the mood to be drilled on his relationship because the problem was, he didn't have a lot of answers.

This was as new for him as it was for her, but as he'd said, they would figure it out.

He wasn't home twenty minutes before Chloe came in through the garage. He'd given her a garage door opener so she could come and go when she wanted and keep her car in the garage at night.

"How did it go?" she asked.

He was in shorts and a T-shirt. It wasn't that warm out but it wasn't cold either. Spring was coming in and he was more comfortable this way.

"It was fine. I asked them not to say anything about the baby. My father and Elise were excited about it more than anything."

"Really?" she asked. He wasn't sure he'd ever seen her that uncertain about anything before.

"Yes. They aren't judgmental. We reserve that for my mother."

"When are you telling her?" she asked.

"No clue. Before the baby is born she'll know. Not even on my radar at the moment. What did Megan and Raina say?"

He knew she was going to tell them she was coming out with the relationship. Or they were going to do it next week. They hadn't figured out how yet, but he could stop at her office on Monday for something and he figured he'd do it with her. Everyone would get a laugh out of it and they could get used to that before the baby news came.

“They were happy that it wasn’t going to be a secret but said they wouldn’t say anything until I told them they could. It’s been nice to be able to talk to them at times.”

“About what?” he asked.

“Just girl things,” she said.

“Why can’t you tell me?” he asked.

She walked over and poked him in the belly. “Because it’s girl talk. You know, like who has a bigger dick.”

His jaw dropped. “You’re joking?”

She burst out laughing. “Of course I am! We don’t talk about that. I don’t know. I don’t have a specific example of anything. They both asked if we could go out to dinner at some point. You’d like Jonah and Cody. They are pretty down-to-earth. But if you don’t want to, that is fine too.”

He liked that she was including him in her life with her friends. That was one thing she’d said she’d kept separate before when she dated, so maybe there was hope for them yet.

“Sure,” he said. “We can do that. But let’s get through this weekend. Elise and my father want to have dinner with us some time too. I told them I’d let them know.”

“That would be nice,” she said. “I know my parents are going to want to meet you right away. They’d want to meet anyone I was dating, but the fact I’m pregnant is a big flag waving to get over for a pot roast dinner.”

He laughed. “Am I going to have to eat pot roast?”

“No,” she said. “I’ll make sure it’s something we both like. I’m not sure I could choke it down either right now.”

“How are you feeling?” he asked, his hand going to her belly. “No issues?”

“Nothing. Which is a good thing because no one can guess. I hope it stays this way.”

“I hope so too, but if it doesn’t just let me know what I can do to help.”

She closed one eye at him. “I don’t care what anyone says, you’re a great catch, Royce. I’m glad you’re going to be my baby’s daddy.”

He’d like to be more than that but knew now wasn’t the time to say it. “You’re a pretty good catch too. So I’m glad I knocked you up and not some other woman.”

She started to laugh so hard she had tears in her eyes. “That was funny.”

“Yeah, it was. But I’m still glad,” he said softly.

“Me too,” she said just as softly back.

AS A FAMILY

“Are you sure you don’t want me to go with you today?” Royce asked her the next morning.

“Yeah, I’m sure. I’m going to call Dane in a few minutes,” she said.

Her brother had to get the kids soon and she’d rather tell him before then.

“I’m here if you need me,” he said.

“I’ll be fine,” she said. She was going to another room to call her brother anyway. It’d be easier than having Royce listen in on one half of the conversation.

Chloe grabbed her phone and went to sit in the living room. He said he was going to go upstairs and work out and give her space anyway and she appreciated that.

Not that she thought he’d eavesdrop, but it was nice to not worry.

She sat down on the couch and put her feet up. Once she heard the music playing upstairs she knew Royce was working out and she dialed Dane.

“Hey,” her brother said on the first ring. “What’s going on?”

“Thanks for being around to talk,” she said.

“Always. Does this have to do with Emily?”

She had banked on him thinking that and not questioning the reason for the call. She had been thinking more about her birth mother now that she was going to be a parent too, but she hadn't talked to Royce about it.

She knew he wouldn't care and tell her it was her decision, but there was part of her that wanted his input too.

They'd had this conversation before about it not making a difference about knowing genetics to have a kid, but now that it was a reality, he might be thinking differently.

“No,” she said. “I wanted to tell you that I'm dating someone.”

“Oh,” Dane said. “That's nice. How long have you been?”

“Almost four months,” she said.

“Wow. It's not like you to keep that secret for so long. How come you did?”

“It's long and complicated. I'll fill you in briefly if you can not interrupt,” she said.

“Okay,” he said.

She told him all about her bosses and what they were trying to do. How Royce's father was in on it too and that she and Royce were approaching it their way. She didn't say it was just sex. There were some things you just didn't say to your older brother.

“So you see, there was a reason we were keeping it secret. We just started out slow. More like friends, I guess. Well, more than that.”

She figured she better add that part since she was pregnant and he could do the math and know it happened pretty fast into their relationship.

Jesus, she was thinking it probably happened the night they were playing with the brownies in bed. Could you imagine on Valentine's Day and a messy sex session with chocolate? It was funny in a way. She hadn't said anything to Royce about it, but it had crossed her mind this week.

"Sounds like things are going well. You know I'm going to want to meet him."

"He knows about you." She paused for a minute. "He knows about Emily. It's his friend that is the PI he put me in contact with."

"Well now," Dane said. "It's not like you to share that much with someone this soon into a relationship."

She knew saying that would explain a lot to him. "No. I guess we just clicked right off the bat. It's a good thing too."

"Yeah," Dane asked. "Why is that?"

"I'm pregnant, Dane."

There was silence that greeted her. "How far along are you?"

"About nine weeks at this point. Give or take. I'm due November first."

"So you've got to tell Mom and Dad that you are not only dating someone, but they are going to be grandparents again?" Dane asked.

"I hear the humor in your voice. But yes."

"Is Royce going with you today?" Dane asked.

“No. He’s asked a few times and I told him no. He told his father and sister last night. Well, his sister knew about me and our dating. She figured it out. His father didn’t. They are both happy about the baby. They know me through work but want to have dinner at some point too. You know, as a family.”

“Just like Mom and Dad are going to want to. I really wish I could be there for you for this. I’ll have the kids though.”

“It’s fine, Dane. I can do it on my own. I’ve been dealing with Mom and Dad for years. They aren’t going to be thrilled, but I’m an adult. This wasn’t planned and I like my life planned out.”

“So what is the next step then?” Dane asked.

“The funny part is we haven’t gotten there, but I’m not worried either.”

“Then that is all that matters,” Dane said. “Let me know how it goes with Mom and Dad.”

She hung up a few minutes later and then went to see Royce before she left to visit her parents.

She hadn’t seen him working out once though she knew he did.

He had shorts on, no shirt and there was a lot of sweat coming down his chest as he lifted weights. She’d heard the treadmill running at one point and assumed he started out there first.

“Holy cow. If that isn’t a way to make me blow off my parents and stay here I’m not sure what is,” she said.

He only grinned at her and continued to do bicep curls. “How did it go with Dane?”

“Good. I knew he’d be fine. He can read between the lines.”

“How is that?” he asked.

“I told him you knew about Emily. He knows it’s not something I tell many.”

Royce nodded his head. “Good. When does he want to meet me?”

She smiled. “Soon. My parents are going to want to also.”

“I’ll make it work,” he said.

She moved over and kissed him, then squeezed his bicep. “I do want to stay here with you, but I should go and get this over with. I’ll pick up something to cook for dinner on my way back. Any requests?”

“Whatever you want, I want,” he said.

“Just what every woman wants to hear.”

She laughed and went down to get her purse and keys.

She was glad Dane took it so well, but she didn’t expect otherwise either. She also could appreciate that Royce was trying to keep it light and make her laugh before she left.

There wasn’t one time in her life that she could remember being afraid to talk to her parents about something and yet this time she was.

They wouldn’t be happy and they were probably going to judge, but it wouldn’t change what happened or how she felt and she’d stick to her guns.

It didn’t take her long to get to her parents’ house and go in. Like Dane, she was guessing they thought she wanted to talk about Emily.

“Hi,” she said to her parents. “Thanks for being here to talk.”

“We are always here,” her mother said.

“I know. And I know you think this is about Emily, but it’s not. I just wanted to tell you that I’m dating someone.”

“Oh,” her father said. “That’s good news. Who is it and how long has it been going on?”

“His name is Royce Kennedy. He, his father and his sister own Kennedy Construction. They are partners with the Fierces and a few other people on that big project I’m working on.”

“So someone you met through work,” her mother said. “That’s nice.”

“We’ve known each other for years.” She decided to tell her parents what her bosses had planned and wasn’t surprised to see their frowns. “As you can tell, there is a reason we kept it quiet.”

“You don’t like anyone telling you what to do,” her mother said. “Nor do you want any pressure on you to do what others think or want.”

“No,” she said. “And if I didn’t have more news we might have kept this quiet a bit longer, but it’s time to let everyone know.”

Her mother frowned. “What news?”

“I’m pregnant. A little over two months. I went to the doctor this week.”

“Chloe,” her mother said. “How could you be so foolish?”

She ground her teeth. She hadn’t expected *that* reaction. “First off, I didn’t plan it. And don’t say it’s a mistake. I hate

that word.”

“We won’t say that word,” her father said. “Right, Doreen?”

She looked at her mother. “Right. But you’re old enough to know better.”

“I wasn’t careless. We protected ourselves, but it still happened. Royce is a great guy. As I said, we’ve known each other for years. We get along great.”

“Do you love him?” her mother asked. She didn’t expect to hear that either.

“Things are moving fast with us. I haven’t said the words to him. I’m not sure what I feel. Do I feel more strongly for him than anyone else? Yes, I do. We are in this together regardless. He told his father and sister last night. They are excited about the baby. They know me already obviously.”

“They get that bonus that we don’t,” her father said. “We want to meet this man that you are going to have a child with. You are going to keep the baby, right?”

“Of course I am,” she said indignantly. “Why would you ask that?”

She didn’t think anyone would question her on that. As a person that was adopted, she’d never consider giving a child up. But not only that, she had the means to raise a child and had a man in her life to help.

Even if she had to do it on her own, she still would have.

“I think, all things considered, it’s a fair question,” her mother said. “We’ve never wanted to assume anything with you before.”

She had to give them that. “Yes, I’m raising this child. I’m doing it with Royce. We are doing it together.”

“So you are moving in together?” her father asked.

“We haven’t gotten that far,” she said. She held her hand up. “Listen, I know you’ve got a lot of questions, but I don’t have answers. I’m sure we will be in the same house by time the baby comes, but it’s early yet.”

“You’ll leave your apartment?” her mother asked.

“Yes. He’s got a nice house not that far from here in a development. Plenty of space. His father’s company built the house twenty years ago or something and then he bought it a few years ago and made a bunch of changes. It will be a nice place to raise a child.”

Funny how she was thinking along those lines rather than co-parenting. Probably better to be positive this way but knew it could go sideways too.

“We just have to trust you know what you’re doing,” her mother said.

“I do,” she said. “I’m not a child. I’m not Emily.”

“Speaking of that,” her mother asked. “Have you decided what you’re going to do?”

“You mean if I’m going to find out more about Emily?” she asked.

“Yes. Or if you want to meet her? Maybe being pregnant now you might be inclined to find out more?”

“I did have a friend of Royce’s that is a PI look into her.” She shared what she found which wasn’t much. “Whether or not I reach out, I’m not sure yet. I can’t focus on that right now.”

“And we won’t,” her father said. “This is about you and the baby and being healthy. That is all anyone cares about.”

“That’s right, Mark,” her mother said. “We are a little bit in shock over the news but don’t mean any harm either.”

“I know,” she said. “You tell me I have to compromise and I am. I have been. But I’m going to continue to do things my way. It’s working for now.”

She just hoped it continued that way too.

THE NEXT STEP

“I ’m here to see Chloe,” Royce said on Monday morning.

He was at Fierce and had to pick up and go over some plans for another project they were working on. It’s not like he actually had to come in for them, but they figured now was the time to let the Fierces know about their relationship.

In his eyes, the sooner he got it out there, the better it’d be and they could move on to the next step in their lives.

Not that he was positive about what it was going to be, but he was thrilled that Chloe cooked dinner for his father and Elise at his house yesterday.

She wasn’t nervous about it either. It was laid back and fun and everyone talked about life in general.

His family was excited about the baby, but they didn’t pressure either of them for answers or questions more than how she was feeling.

He knew her family gave her a harder time and felt bad she had to do it alone. But she wouldn’t be alone again going forward.

“Is she expecting you or do I need to call back?” the woman at the front desk asked.

“She knows I’m coming,” he said.

He moved past the woman and to the back of the building where Chloe’s office was located.

When he got to the back, he knocked on her open door and then went in.

“Hey,” she said. “Here for the blueprints?”

He rolled his eyes, not sure why she said that. “That and something more,” he said.

She laughed at him. “Come in. I let it drop around Grant that you were stopping in around this time to go over a few things. I could see his eyes light up and I expect them to be here soon.”

She got up from her desk and went to shut her door but leave it open a crack.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“They like to be sneaky and spy on people.” She was talking quietly now. “I’m not trying to be mean but just having fun with this. That is what they say they do with us, right?”

“Yeah,” he said, his hand on her back. The Fierces were partners with him now, not just clients. Maybe they felt they had some more freedom, he wasn’t sure.

“Let’s look these over while you’re here and see if you’ve got any questions.”

They looked at the blueprints and she was flipping through and showing him the changes she’d made. There wasn’t much

he had to ask because she knew what she was doing and there were rarely any issues.

“How long do you think they will be?” he asked. “I want to get my mouth on you again. It was lonely in bed last night.”

She turned her head and looked at him. There was a smile on her face.

They hadn't talked about living together or anything like that, but he was positive she'd be on board with it soon.

“We only spend one to two nights together as it is,” she said.

“I know,” he said. They heard a noise outside her office. “Now what?”

“Kiss me,” she said quickly.

“What?” he asked.

“We are looking over the blueprints and you can lean down and give me a little kiss on the lips. Not a makeout session. This is my office, you know.”

He laughed at her and put his lips to hers for a second, then she pulled back and looked at the door and saw Grant and Garrett standing there.

“Are we interrupting?” Grant asked. There was a massive smile on his face as if he was going to high-five his brother.

“No,” she said. “Was there something you needed from us?”

He would give Chloe credit for being so casual about being caught kissing when her bosses had been trying to aggressively set them up for months and hadn't gotten anywhere.

“Yes,” Garrett said. “What is going on here? You’ve been playing with us, haven’t you?”

Royce looked at Chloe. She wanted to handle this so he was going to let her. “Don’t you play with all of us here?” she asked.

Grant and Garrett looked at each other and their shoulders dropped. “How long has this been going on?”

“Does it matter?” Chloe asked. “I think it’s more you didn’t see it coming. Win for me.” He heard the humor in her voice and smiled again.

“Who didn’t see it coming?” Grant said. “We’ve known all along.”

Grant turned to his brother who gave him an elbow pump. “We’re always right,” Garrett said. “I’m not sure why everyone doubts us. Even our wives have been doing it. I can’t wait to go back and rub their faces in this.”

Royce let out a snort over that. “That’s a little harsh,” he said.

“Our wives can be that way with us,” Garrett said. “We had this all along. But you had us going. Is it recent? It has to be recent.”

Chloe grinned. “Since the middle of December or so.”

“Noooo,” Grant said. “You guys barely talked to each other at the Christmas Eve party. And the same on New Year’s Eve.”

“Maybe because you aren’t the only ones that can be sneaky,” Chloe said. “We knew we were being watched. It was fun.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter as long as everything is working out. And your father is aware?” Grant asked him.

“He is,” Royce said. “We had dinner with him and Elise yesterday. I’m sure the minute you leave this office you will be on the phone with him and comparing notes.”

“Of course,” Grant said. “No reason to hide anything now. Right? This is out in the open?”

“It is,” Chloe said. “Though there were some that knew already.”

“Why am I not surprised,” Garrett said. “People like keeping things from us.”

He watched as the brothers left Chloe’s office. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?” she asked him.

“No. I’m not one for being the center of attention, but that wasn’t as horrible as I thought.”

“It wasn’t. And you can bet it’s going to make the rounds fast. You can sneak out of here and leave it to me to deal with.”

He wasn’t sure he wanted to do that but had a crazy amount of work to do today. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing bad,” she said. She looked up and saw Jade, Drake and Ryder standing there. “You know already?”

“We always knew,” Jade said. “Or I did. Ryder and Drake were guessing. I swear my father and uncle are dancing around the office on cloud nine right now.”

“They moved faster than I thought they could,” Royce said.

“We were in Drake’s office when they popped their head in to announce it,” Ryder said. “Be glad it isn’t over the intercom.”

“They wouldn’t dare,” Chloe said.

“No,” Drake said. “They’d rather walk around and gloat face to face with people.”

“Well, if that is all,” Royce said. “I need to get to work.” He leaned down and kissed Chloe one more time. “Let me know how the day goes. I’ll talk to you later.”

He moved past her to walk out with the blueprints and Drake followed him, as it would pass by his office. “You know our fathers are just having fun, right?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I know that. It’s out now so maybe the hype will die with it and they can move on to someone else.”

“That poor person that is next,” Drake said. “But not too many of us are complaining right now, so it’s all good too.”

Royce wasn’t complaining either but wasn’t going to admit it. They could see for themselves.

He was just happy that he and Chloe could hopefully focus on the two of them now and not so much on not being caught.



“I TOLD you we knew what we were doing,” Garrett said to Richard on the phone twenty minutes later.

“You did,” he said. “I didn’t think Royce had it in him to play games the way he did, but it’s all good now.”

Richard had to be careful what he said. He’d promised the baby would stay a secret. Even if he was thrilled to know he

was going to be a grandfather and loved that they had a family dinner at his son's house yesterday.

They'd also told him they were letting everyone else know about the relationship today so that he could talk openly if he wanted.

"I know you are getting into your busy season," Grant said. "Royce will be working nonstop so it's good this got situated before that time."

"I did think of that too," he said. "He's always been one to put work over everything else. He gets that from me and not in a good way. But they seem to have a good understanding of each other and I can see where Chloe will be supportive and not demanding."

At least he hoped so. Or hoped his son figured out a better way to balance things than what he had.

Without his kids getting on his case, he was going to slowly start to get out in the field more and take the pressure off of Royce. It was the least he could do. It was time to reevaluate their projects and oversight.

He wanted his son to have everything he didn't get out of a relationship and that meant not doing it alone.

"Chloe has always been an independent one," Garrett said. "It's why we thought they'd hit it off so well and we were right."

"You were," he said. "In more ways than one."

"What ways are they?" Grant asked.

Shit. He was slipping. "This business venture," he said. "It's going to be just as successful as your matchmaking has been."

Both of the brothers laughed over the phone. “That’s a given. We don’t do anything half-assed in our life.”

“I need to take a page from your book,” he said. “Or maybe that is what I’ve been doing for the past several years and it’s starting to work. Who knows?”

“You’re doing everything you can, Richard,” Grant said. “Remember that. We all want what is best for our kids.”

“That’s right,” he said. “I’m hoping Royce learned from my mistakes.”

He hung up a few minutes later and went back to work after he looked at the schedule and what was going on. Then he sent Royce a text and told him he’d start to manage a few more projects, that he was itching to get outside again.

Royce and Elise might give him some shit over it, but he felt great and there was no reason not to do it. Life was too short and his kids deserved their shot at happiness too.

NAME OF THE GAME

““**M**om, Dad, this is Royce Kennedy. Royce, my parents, Mark and Doreen Grey.”

Royce moved forward and shook hands with her parents. “You didn’t say he was so tall,” her mother said. “Nice to meet you.”

Chloe let out a sigh. She told herself not to take exception to things said today. Her parents wanted to meet Royce and she wanted them to all get along. Dane had wanted to meet him too and, between his rotations with the hospital and everything going on in their lives, it’d taken a few weeks and was decided they’d have Easter together.

It wasn’t a major holiday in her eyes, but she was damn well going to spend it with him. This was going to be the beginning of many things she’d have to figure out.

For someone that was told she didn’t compromise much, it seemed to be the name of the game in her life currently.

“You too,” Royce said.

“Chloe tells us you own a construction company with your father?” her father said.

“And my sister,” he said. “Elise and I each have equal shares and my father the rest.”

“I told you that, Dad,” she said.

“I’m sorry. I just forgot. We don’t know a lot about you and would like to know more. Chloe isn’t one to always volunteer information about her life. We weren’t shocked she’d been dating someone for a while but were with the baby announcement.”

“Things happen in life,” he said. “I’m committed to your daughter and this child. I know we haven’t been dating long, but we’ve known each other and worked together for years.”

Her heart was racing over his choice of words. In the past few weeks she’d known she was falling in love with Royce.

She’d never been one to shy away from voicing what was on her mind and wasn’t so sure why she was this time.

It’s not like they weren’t going to be tied together for life now with a child between them.

“As Chloe has told us,” her mother said. “But not much more. We know you’ve got a house not far from here. One that has a lot of space in it.”

She should have figured this would come up. “Mom. We are working it out. I’ve got my lease for a few more months and Royce and I haven’t talked all that much yet.”

“I’ve told Chloe that I’m going to be there for her and the baby. My house is plenty big enough and a great place to raise a family. I’m sure you’re aware that Chloe isn’t someone to push and that she has to come to decisions on her own.”

Her parents looked at each other and smiled. She might be annoyed over Royce’s choice of words, but they were the truth.

“I guess you know her better than we thought.”

She turned to see Dane coming in the door with the kids behind him. He only had them for a few hours today and then had to return them to Melanie. They were having an early dinner here and then she'd go back to Royce's house. They hadn't made plans on if she'd stay the night, but she was going to need the comfort of it for sure.

"Dane, this is Royce Kennedy. Royce, my brother, Dane Grey."

"Daddy is a doctor," Tiffani said.

"And this is my niece, Tiffani, and my nephew, Tyler. Kids, this is my boyfriend, Royce."

Royce shook hands with everyone, even the kids who giggled. "Nice to meet you. Did you find all the Easter Bunny's eggs this morning?"

"We did," Tiffani said. "He's sneaky too. Some were too high up for us and Daddy had to get them. And when we go to Mommy's house she said the Easter Bunny went there too. She'll help us find them."

"I can find them on my own," Tyler said. "And I would rather stay at Daddy's house."

Chloe looked at her brother and he just shook his head. She'd have to find out what was going on there and realized that she was so focused on her life that she hadn't found out much about Dane's. She wasn't normally like that.

"You'll be back soon," Dane said. "You know how it is, Tyler."

"Please," her mother said, "come have a seat. Children, you've got Easter baskets here too from Grandma and Grandpa and Aunt Chloe."

“Yay,” Tyler said, running to the table where the baskets were. Chloe had fun putting together some toys and candy. She remembered when she was a kid it was more candy than anything. Not really gifts. But her mind went to how it’d be a year from now with her own child.

Hell, the baby would be here at Christmas too. Not that old, but old enough there would be gifts under the tree to be opened.

Yeah, she had to stop thinking of those things when she and Royce were still in different locations right now.

Maybe later they could talk some more about things.

“Can we get you anything to drink?” her father asked Royce. “Doreen is going to put some snacks out.”

“I’m good,” Royce said.

“I’ll help you, Mom.”

She left Royce to talk with Dane and her father and went to the kitchen.

“He seems very nice,” her mother said.

“He is. I’m not sure why you thought otherwise.”

“It’s as I said. You haven’t said that much about him so we weren’t sure. It’s only been a few months.”

She held back a sarcastic comment. “I know. But I told you I’ve known him for years. He’s a great guy. He was good with the kids just now.”

“Is that the first time you’ve seen him around kids?”

“Yes,” she said.

“So you have no idea what you’re getting into.”

She almost growled. “I didn’t know how I’d be with a kid either until Tiffani was born. Not everyone is just born knowing what to do or great about kids like Dane is.”

“No,” her mother said. “I’m worried about you. Babies take time and care.”

“I know that,” she said. She knew where this was going too.

“But you like your own time and space. It’s not a secret. Even Royce seems to know that you can’t be pushed. I’ve got to imagine owning his own company he isn’t around much. You haven’t said if his parents are married or not?”

“They aren’t,” Royce said, coming into the kitchen. “My mother wanted more than my father could give. My father gave more than enough, but it was never enough for her. She liked the money, but that was it. When she decided to leave she didn’t want to have me with her but wanted my sister because it would look bad if neither kid wanted to be with her.”

“Oh,” her mother said.

“Mom,” she said. “This is personal.”

“It’s fine,” Royce said. “I’m an open book. I don’t have a problem with this. I don’t have a great relationship with my mother and neither does my sister. We both stayed with my father who we were closer with and have never regretted it. Not everyone has a great relationship with both of their parents in life, but that doesn’t mean they won’t be a good parent themselves.”

Chloe smiled. “You’re right. I don’t doubt it. As my mother just pointed out, I might have to not be selfish and give

up my time for a child. You know, as if I wouldn't have realized that."

Royce reached out and pulled her close to his side. "We'll figure it out. I'm here for Chloe and she knows it. We aren't kids but mature adults."

"That's right," she said. "I know you mean well with everything, Mom, but please. Can we just enjoy this family meal? There aren't any secrets here and never have been."

Her mother lifted her eyebrow at her. "We didn't know about Royce."

"That isn't a secret as much as I'm private and you know it. I told you about the letter from Emily and that I had someone look into her too and what was found."

"What are your thoughts on that?" her mother asked Royce.

"Mom," Dane said, coming into the room. "It's not the time. The kids are asking for food too. I'm sure Chloe will fill you in later."

She grabbed one plate of food out of the fridge and then brought it to the dining room table and set it out for the kids to pick at it.

Royce followed with her. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be. This is natural. I get it."

"No, it's not natural."

He laughed. "Chloe. You haven't met my mother. This is tame. Trust me."

She'd have to take his word for it and hoped to just get through this day.

“Does your father normally cook for holidays?” Chloe asked several hours later. They had gotten through dinner and then Dane had left to bring the kids to Melanie’s and she and Royce took their leave too. Then they went to see his father and sister for a quick visit and now were back at his place.

“Yes. My father is a good cook. He tried to give us everything he thought we lost when my parents split. I know you think maybe I didn’t have a traditional upbringing like you did.”

“Please,” she said, waving her hand. “Tiffani and Tyler aren’t having the same upbringing that Dane and I did. I see him rushing from place to place and doing his best to make sure they don’t suffer for it. Something must be going on with Tyler though that he doesn’t want to go to his mother’s.”

“It could be. Or maybe he just has a better connection to his father. I did. I always knew it. Elise did too. I don’t know Melanie to know one way or another.”

“She isn’t a bad person. Don’t get me wrong. She is doing what she thinks is right for the kids and they seem well adjusted. As Dane said, sometimes you just fall in love with the wrong person.”

“I think that can be said about a lot of people in life,” he said. “My parents. Your brother. We’ve both had relationships in the past too.”

“I’ve never been in love. Have you?”

He seemed shocked to hear her say that. “I have,” he said.

“Oh. What happened with her?” she asked.

They were sitting on the couch in Royce’s house and relaxing. She’d eaten more than she thought she should have but wasn’t feeling that sick either. Just really stuffed.

“I don’t know yet,” he said, kissing her on the forehead.

“What?” she asked, turning to look at him.

“You,” he said. “One of us has to say this and have this conversation. I guess maybe it’s me. You started it all when you put me on the spot with your proposition. The rules have changed once again, don’t you think?”

She laughed. “I’m pretty sure most of our rules don’t apply anymore.”

“Probably not. But I’d still like to keep the fun in it.”

“Me too,” she said. “Go back to what you were saying about love.”

He shut one eye at her. “I love you. I’m not sure when it started. I think it had more to do with me not wanting to be stuck in the friend’s category and just sex and trying to figure out a way to get out of that.”

“That’s funny. I was thinking the same thing. Though putting this little bun in the oven wasn’t what my thought was.”

“No,” he said. “It’s not or wasn’t for me either, but it is what it is and we’ll move forward with it. And now you know how I feel. How do you feel?”

“I think I love you too,” she said.

“You think?” he asked.

“I do know. It’s just all so scary and happening at once. Then my mother is always asking questions and that doesn’t help.”

“I heard her and wanted you to know you weren’t alone. She brought up Emily a few times. Why is that?”

“I don’t know. She never did before. Maybe she is worried that being pregnant now I’ll want to know more.”

“Do you?” he asked.

“I’m still on the fence. I’m just trying to take it day by day.”

He stood up and held his hand out. “Then that is what we’ll do. I’m not going to put pressure on you for anything other than sex.”

She laughed. “Well then. I’m all game for that.”

“But if you want to start leaving more clothes here or other items there is plenty of room too,” he said.

They walked to his bedroom and he picked her up before he got to the doorway and carried her to his bed. “I’ll think about it. You know I’ll be here before the baby is born.”

“I figured as much,” he said.

“I like that you know me without me saying that much,” she said. “Without even asking and letting me decide on it.”

“Know you like this?” he asked, his mouth lowering to hers as he laid her on the bed.

“Always like that,” she said.

His hands slid under her shirt and rested on her flat belly. “Do you feel anything?” he asked.

“No. There is part of me that is bummed over that. The other part is looking forward to something.”

“There will be a time you won’t want it either, I’m sure,” he said, his hands lifting the shirt over her head, then unclipping her bra and sliding it off.

His mouth lowered to her nipple. “They look darker to me. Fuller too.” His tongue came out and swirled around and she all but jumped off the bed.

“That is different,” she said. “They are very sensitive.”

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked.

“Not if you know what is good for you,” she said, nudging his head down and holding it there.

He pulled her nipple in and sucked, her back arching off the bed while he did it. “You like that more than you used to,” he said.

“Guess there is one benefit right now,” she said. “I feel good and am hornier than normal. You’re going to take care of that for me though, right?”

“Always,” he said, undressing her.

They were reaching for each other as fast as they could. She wondered if at some point they’d have more time or wouldn’t rush but then said if she was always this attracted to him, it wasn’t a bad thing.

Once they were naked she shoved him on his back and then climbed on top of him. “I think I just need to be in control right now.” She didn’t feel as if her life was out of control, but there were moments she had to take a deep breath and rein it in.

She slid up and grabbed his dick. She was trying not to think of her mother’s comment about Royce being so big, but she loved it. She was glad that her child was going to get these genes too, as she wasn’t always thrilled being just five foot three.

“Are you going to hold it and play with it all night or do something more?”

“I love playing with it. I was just thinking of your genetics. I love the size of you. The look of you. So hot and all mine. I hope our child gets your size.”

She scooted up and aimed over his cock and slid down. She let out a sigh. She couldn't help herself. It just felt too wonderful.

“You won't want that if it's a girl,” he said.

His eyes were locked on hers as she rode him up and down. “I don't care if it's a boy or girl. Do you?”

“No,” he said. He reached for her hands and threaded their fingers together. “I'm going to love it just the same. Just the same way I do their mother.”

She leaned forward on her hands locking his to the mattress, her mouth going to his, her hips moving up and down, meeting and retreating as they brought each other to the pinnacle of ecstasy like they always did.

He released his hands and put them on her ass, held her down as he lifted up into her again and again.

She felt herself climbing, but there was more this time. It was deeper and stronger and she wondered if it had to do with the love she felt and expressed or it was the hormones in her body.

Then as everything else let go, she asked herself why she even cared what the reason was and just had to accept that she was thrilled she was experiencing it.

HOW SHORT LIFE IS

“Royce, it’s Dad! You need to meet us at the hospital now,” Elise said a month later.

“What?” he said. He barely had time to answer before Elise was yelling into the phone at him. “What hospital? What is going on?”

“Duke,” Elise said. “He was having chest pains in the office. The ambulance just took him away. Hurry.”

“Shit,” he said. He was at the commercial building right now overseeing multiple projects going on at once. He and Elise hadn’t wanted to cut back other jobs either so they were going full force into their crazy work schedule and it would only continue for months.

He’d been thrilled when his father said he wanted to get out and help the oversight more and he’d made sure his father was not doing much more than checking on things and not doing any heavy work.

He must not have been paying enough attention for this to happen.

The minute he got to his truck he called Chloe quickly. “Hi, Royce. What’s going on?”

“It’s my father. He’s on the way to the hospital via ambulance. Elise just called and said he was having chest pains.”

“Oh my God. I’ll come as soon as I can.”

“No,” he said. “You don’t need to.”

“I do,” she said. “Text me when you get there so I know where I’m going. I’m not letting you do this alone and you know it.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I appreciate it.”

He raced to the hospital and found Elise. “I don’t know anything else.”

“I didn’t think you would,” he said. “Just tell me what happened.”

“I don’t know. Dad didn’t look good today. I noticed he hasn’t lately. I asked what was going on and he said he was just tired. He’d been a little lightheaded earlier, but he hadn’t eaten anything.”

“Did you tell him to call his doctor?” he asked.

“Royce. He never listens to us. You know that. I’m lucky I got that much out of him.”

He knew that. His father was stubborn that way and didn’t want his kids to worry. “Did you bring him food at least?”

“Of course I did,” Elise said. “I made him some toast and put peanut butter on it. He ate it all and had coffee. Then he seemed fine. He buzzed me to come into his office quickly and I ran in there and he was holding his chest. I panicked and called nine-one-one and he didn’t argue with me.”

“He’s doing too much again. Damn it. I know he’s trying to take shit off my plate so I can be with Chloe, but she understands. She gets it.”

“You can’t tell Dad anything and you know it,” she said. “Don’t blame yourself for this. We don’t even know what it is. Maybe it’s just heartburn.”

He hoped but didn’t think that was the case.

He texted Chloe to fill her in and she said she was on her way and would be there soon. There was no reason to tell her not to come. He wanted her here anyway.

An hour went by while they all sat there and waited without any answers. It was driving him insane, but Chloe kept him and Elise calm. Guess he knew she was good under pressure.

“I’d get you another coffee, but you don’t need to be any more wired,” Chloe said to him.

“No. I just wish we could get some answers from someone. No one will tell us anything,” Elise said.

“Let me call Dane,” Chloe said. “I know it’s not a part of where he works, but who knows if he can find something out or at least direct us where to ask.”

“That would be great,” he said. Royce never wanted to ask for favors, but at this point he needed some answers.

He watched as she called her brother but then she left a message. “I’m not sure how long it will take him to get back to me, but he’s pretty good about returning my calls. I don’t call him often so he might be worried it’s an emergency.”

“Thanks,” he said, pulling her by his side.

It was another twenty minutes before her phone rang. “It’s Dane. Hi, Dane. I’m sorry to bother you.” Royce listened while she talked to her brother. She said thanks and hung up, then looked at him. “He knows a nurse that just transferred from the ER to his office and he’s going to go talk to her and see if she can find anything out from someone here.”

“I appreciate it,” he said. “I guess we just have to wait though.”

They didn’t wait long before someone came out and called his name. “That’s me,” Royce said. “Do you know anything about my father? Richard Kennedy. He was brought in close to two hours ago with chest pains via an ambulance.”

“They are getting him ready for surgery now. There is a problem with his pacemaker. He was aware enough that something was going on with his body and they ran some tests and will get it squared away.”

“He’s not having a heart attack again?” Elise asked.

“I’m not positive. A doctor will fill you in more. I’m just coming out to say he’s going in for surgery and what they are doing.”

“Thanks,” Royce said. He turned to his sister. “It’s better than not knowing.”

“That’s right,” Chloe said. “Maybe it’s nothing that could have been prevented. I know you’ve been upset with him working more, but if it’s the equipment and not him, they can fix that.”

“I hope so,” he said. “I can’t bear to think he isn’t going to make it. He’s got to be here for the baby’s birth.”

“And he will be,” she said. “You know it.”

A few more hours went by. Chloe and he went to get some food. Elise stayed in case someone came out looking for them. He wanted to make sure she ate and didn't get too stressed out either. He brought back a sandwich for Elise, as they were in a more private waiting room at this point.

Finally a doctor came in and called their name and he and Elise stood up and went to talk to him.

“Your father came out fine from surgery. He's in recovery right now. His pacemaker's battery failed. He wasn't showing any signs of a heart attack. My belief is he knew something was going on in his body and maybe he was having a panic attack. That isn't a bad thing.”

Royce grinned. “It's not like him to do that.”

“No,” Elise said. “But maybe he didn't want to have another heart attack. I don't know and don't care. Can he come home tonight?”

“I'd like to keep him overnight to just monitor and be sure, but he should be fine. He's had this surgery before. But he was recovering from a heart attack on top of it. He's going to need someone to care for him for a few days. Well, not care but not leave him alone for at least twenty-four hours.”

“I'll stay with him,” Elise said.

“Are you sure?” Royce asked. “I can do it.”

“No. I can work from home and keep an eye on him.”

They talked to the doctor a few more minutes and then were told one of them could go back to see their father. He let Elise go first. She was more emotional than him and would have to see their father with her own eyes. He was the type that would listen to the doctor when he was told their father was fine.

“You don’t have to wait here for me,” he said to Chloe. “I could be here for a while.”

“I’ll stay until you go talk to him. I’ll stay out here with Elise at least then I’ll go back to your place. I’ll be there when you get out.”

“Really?” he asked.

“Yeah. I wouldn’t be anywhere else. And I know you’re really busy so if you don’t have an issue with it, maybe I’ll bring some things to your house to keep there. You’re stressing over not seeing me and getting work done. I’m fine.”

He wasn’t surprised she’d figured that much out. “I know you are. I don’t want to miss anything though.”

“I understand. And you aren’t pushing me, which I appreciate. It’s not the time to talk about this, but know I’ll be at your house when you get out.”

He gave her a quick kiss. “Thanks.”

Hours later he was finally pulling into his garage and opening the door to the house.

He smelled food cooking and realized how hungry he was.

“How is your father doing?” she asked.

“He’s good. Said he’s embarrassed over the panic attack. That all he could think of was that he wasn’t going to see his grandkid when he started to not feel well for a few days.”

“That isn’t going to happen,” she said. “We know that, right?”

“I told him that. He’s not happy Elise is going to be staying with him, but he didn’t argue too much. He’s going to have to

take it easy for three to four weeks. No lifting or anything, but he's been good about that for the most part anyway."

"Does it bother him to not be more hands on?" she asked.

"I don't think so. He does some things around the house. He's not stupid. He's always felt like he had to be there for us because my mother wasn't."

"Now he wants to be there for a grandchild?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I made some mac and cheese and there is grilled chicken too. Once you told me you were leaving I started the chicken."

"I'm going to shower first if you don't mind," he said.

"Go ahead," she said.

He went to his room and started to remove his clothes. He pulled out underwear and a clean T-shirt and shorts. When he did, he pulled open another drawer that he'd had empty for Chloe and saw more of her things in there. He walked into the closet and found clothes hanging in there too. Not a ton but a few days' worth.

He was sure he could get used to coming home to this daily but knew enough to not voice that.

Chloe wasn't the type to always have dinner on the table for him. Least of all late at night.

She had a career too and she wasn't going to put her life on hold for him to arrive at all hours of the night either. This time of year, sometimes he'd be lucky to be home by eight. As long as there was daylight they could be working longer.

"Come and sit. Eat," she said.

"I saw your clothes there."

“I told you I was going to,” she said. “Is there a problem with it?”

“No,” he said. “I was thinking it was nice.”

“Good,” she said.

He filled his plate and sat to eat. “What’s going on?”

“What?” she asked.

“You. There is something on your mind. I think I know you well enough to know that now.”

“It’s not the time,” she said. “You’ve had a long day.”

She continued to eat, but he couldn’t wait for her to spill whatever was going on.

“I have had a long day. But I also can make time for you. Everything okay? Do you feel okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “I guess, today just made me realize how short life is or can be.”

“Yeah,” he said. “The second time I’ve had this scare.”

“I know this is my decision and all, but I think I need to talk to Emily. It just reminded me how fast she might be gone. Maybe there were things I didn’t want to know or care about before, but I do now. I might need to know them for our child. If I wait I might lose that chance.”

“It’s up to you, Chloe. I’m going to support whatever decision you decide to make.”

“I know. I love you for that. I think I’m going to reach out to her this week when things settle down. It won’t hurt to talk. I’d like to know why she reached out now. Maybe it’s a medical reason? I don’t know. But I should know.”

“And you want to know who your birth father is, right?”

“It’d be nice to get a name. I just don’t believe she doesn’t know, but I could be wrong.”

“I’m going to be there for you for it,” he said.

“You don’t have to be,” she said.

“Chloe. This is the thing about love. We are there for each other. You are going to have to get used to it. Or do we need more ground rules?”

She laughed at him. “Fine. You can be there if it works in your schedule. Your father has to come first.”

He reached his hand over to hold hers. “I will make it work. You’re coming first.”

She grinned. “Look at us. Two people who sucked at relationships before and you’d never know it now.”

“Well, it is early yet. I’m sure I’ll still mess up.”

“You probably won’t be the only one,” she said.

He dug into his food while he laughed with her. “It could be a good story to share with our kids someday.”

“What’s that? That I just wanted you for your body?” she asked.

“Maybe you’re right. Some things they don’t need to know.”

END UP ALONE

Royce looked at his phone ringing on Saturday morning. He was surprised to see it was his mother but knew he should answer it. He hadn't talked to her since Christmas and it'd been a peaceful several months.

"Hello," he said.

"Royce," his mother said. "I heard about your father. When were you going to tell me?"

"I wasn't aware you needed to know about it," he said. "You never have anything good to say about him. It's not like you're still married."

"No," his mother said. "But he's your father and you're my children."

She only pulled that card out when she was annoyed over something. He was assuming he'd find out what that was about soon enough.

"How did you find out?"

"Elise told me. I called her a few days ago and she wasn't returning my calls. It's not like her to avoid me that long."

His sister could be tough when she wanted to be. "What did she tell you?"

“That your father had been in the hospital and had chest pains again. I’m sure it’s putting work first again like he always did. He never cared about anything else in his life but that company. You and your sister are going to end up alone just like him.”

He ground his teeth. “I know for a fact Elise would have told you exactly what was going on and you are twisting the words to be what you want. His pacemaker failed. He was smart enough to know something wasn’t right and his chest pains were panic more than anything. He’s fine and recovering.”

“Your father never panicked over anything in life unless it had to do with the business.”

He wasn’t going to listen to this again. He was fed up with it and he was pretty sure Elise was too.

“You remember things the way you want to remember them,” he said. “I’m not sure why you can’t let go. You got what you wanted out of life.”

“I’m just looking out for my children. Don’t make the same mistakes that your father did,” his mother snapped.

“There is no reason to look out for me,” he said. He decided he might as well tell her about Chloe. She’d have to find out anyway. “I can take care of myself. I’ve got a girlfriend and child coming and I’m happy in my life. She loves me and accepts me for who I am.”

“What?” his mother asked. “Why am I just hearing about this now?”

“Because you never call me unless it’s to bitch,” he said. “I don’t need that in my life now any more than I did when I was a kid. I’m fully capable of making my own decisions.”

“Are you even going to give me any details about this woman? You said you’ve got a child coming? You never said anything about this at Christmas.”

“Her name is Chloe. I met her years ago through work. She’s an engineer. She’s due with our child in November.”

“You’ve been dating someone for years and never said a word to me?” his mother asked.

“There you go again hearing what you want and not listening. I said I’d known her for years. Things were starting to change with us in December.”

There, that didn’t sound so bad. It was when he realized what was going on. Or when Chloe filled him in on what was going on.

“So you got her pregnant and now she is stuck with you. Or she wants to be with you because of the company?”

“This is exactly why no one tells you anything, Mom,” he said. “You’ve got it all wrong, but I’m not going to waste my time explaining it because you’re going to believe what you want anyway.”

He hung up the phone. He didn’t have the patience for this.

“That sounded pleasant.”

He turned and saw Chloe standing there. She’d been upstairs measuring the room they were going to use as the nursery. He told her to let him know what she had in mind and he could start to put things together. Paint and so on when the time came.

He’d like to build some shelves in there and make it special for his child.

“My mother,” he said. “You know we don’t have the best relationship. I guess she has been calling Elise who has been ignoring her and then Elise must have just lit into her and said she was busy with Dad. I have no idea; I’m only guessing. As always, my mother hears what she wants and then criticizes on top of it.”

He told her the rest of the conversation and then saw her face get red.

“I’m not with you for money,” she said. “I hope you don’t think that.”

“I don’t,” he said. “You’ve got a good job. Besides, if you were that type of person the Fierces wouldn’t have picked you out for me.”

She crossed her arms. “Not funny.”

Guess he wasn’t so good at cracking jokes and this could turn into another one of their disagreements. “You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t. I’m not your mother. I never will be.”

“I know that. She just rubs me the wrong way all the time.”

“That’s fine. I get it. But don’t transfer that to me. I’m not going to give you crap for coming home late. I’m not going to make comments about if you’re dirty or sweaty or stink or anything like that.”

“I don’t think that.”

“I think you do,” she said.

“No more than you are holding back moving in here because you are worried you won’t have your space and time to do what you want.”

Her shoulders dropped as if she didn't expect to be called out on that. "Maybe we both have things to overcome."

"No maybe about it. Listen, Chloe. Take whatever space you want in the house for yours to do what you want. Call it a sanctuary if you want. I don't care. Go up there to knit or watch chick flicks. I'll just watch something else down here."

She laughed at him. "I don't knit and if I'm going to watch a chick flick you're watching it with me."

"You know what I mean," he said.

"I do. We haven't talked much about the future. We are both just making assumptions here."

"That's right. We are. Might as well talk now. I'm going to say what I want and you can tell me if I'm wrong or if it's not what you have planned."

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I want you to move in. You know that. I want you to be here when my child comes. I want to help you. I'm not going to crowd you. I don't even have it in me to crowd someone. I'm more worried you are going to think I'm not doing enough."

"I'm not worried about that," she said.

"If you are or get that way, I want you to let me know," he said. "Promise me that. I own part of the damn company and can step back if I need to."

"Stop it," she said. "Just like I want you to tell me if you think I'm not making the time for you. If you need me to have dinner on the table and all that stuff you need to tell me. I'm not sure I'm there. That I'm that person."

He laughed. “Trust me, I know that. I’m going to admit it was nice to have it the other day when I came home from the hospital. But I don’t expect you to wait for me to eat. Never that. I’ve been feeding myself for years. If you make yourself dinner and there is something left over I’ll warm it up. I’m a big boy.”

She let out a sigh. “I guess this is the stuff we need to talk about.”

“We know the other has faults. Remember that is how we got to this point. I’m not going to ask you to change,” he said.

“Good,” she said. “I know I have to and can and will. That is life. But I can’t be someone I’m not.”

“The same,” he said. “I’m going to say it again. I want you to move in. You said you’ll be here before the baby is born, but I’d love it if you did it now. But I’m not going to push you. It’s out there. Open invitation.”

“Thank you for that. My lease is up in a few months. My plan was to do it then. But maybe since I’m still able to do a lot of things I should move more now. Let’s just get past this with your father. I can start to move things over slowly. I don’t have a lot.”

“You don’t. We can put your stuff wherever you want it. There is enough space in this house. I said to set aside another room for you with a TV, so do it upstairs or over the garage.”

She waved her hand. “I’m not thinking that. I’m not even thinking anything has to be changed here. I like your house the way it is.”

“But you can change things. I’ll do it.”

“I can do it too if you trust me. Paint isn’t that hard.”

He wanted to argue with her but decided not to. They'd get to that when the time came. "Whatever," he said. "Tell me what you want."

"I want to be here. I want to know it's what you want and not just for the baby."

"Fine," he said, moving toward her. He yanked her into his arms and she landed softly against his chest. "I want you in my bed every night so that I can tell you I love you. So that I can watch our child grow in your belly and feel its movements. I want to be the type of father that my father was to me. I'm going to be a better partner to you than my father was to my mother."

"Something tells me your father wasn't that bad," she said, smiling at him.

"I don't think so, but my mother did. I only care what you think. I'm not going to guess. We have to talk to each other to get through this. Agreed?"

"Agreed," she said. "I guess that wasn't so hard. I'm not sure why we both thought it was so hard before."

"Maybe because neither of us tried enough or even found someone to care enough before."

"Could be," she said.

"And I want you to talk to me about Emily too. No holding it in."

She was supposed to meet her birth mother next weekend. They were going together. She wasn't sure what she was hoping to get out of the meeting and neither was he, but he'd be by her side just like she'd been by his this week.

“I won’t,” she said. “I’m not sure what I feel. It’s odd. I always thought I didn’t feel much and in the past several months I almost feel too much. It’s a bit overwhelming.”

“Just like life can be,” he said.

NEED SOME ANSWERS

The following Sunday morning, Chloe and Royce pulled into a restaurant for brunch to meet Emily Nichols, her birth mother.

“How are you feeling about this?” Royce asked her when they got out.

“About as good as can be expected.”

If she felt a little nauseous this morning she kept it to herself. She didn't need Royce panicking that she was feeling ill with the pregnancy when so far she hadn't felt much at all. Matter of fact she felt so little that there were times she wondered if she really was pregnant.

She knew she was. She'd had a doctor's appointment this week and Royce went with her. They heard their baby's heartbeat, nice and strong. They were told everything was well and she was out of the first trimester.

“We don't have to go in,” he said. “You can turn around and we can go home and chill out for the day. No one will blame you if you change your mind.”

“No,” she said. “I have to know. I knew this going in. Once I took this step there would be no going back. I just need some answers. Maybe it will be enough and I can move on.”

But as Dane said, she didn't think that would be the case.

They opened the door and said they were waiting for one other person. She hadn't said she was bringing Royce with her. Until this morning she wasn't positive she was going to let him come but in the end realized it was the right thing to do. Mentally for her, that is.

It was hard for her to admit that though. That she needed help and support from someone else.

She had to get used to it though because she was bringing another person into this world and she knew she couldn't do it alone.

"You have to decide that," he said. "I won't push you either way."

"Thanks for that."

They took a seat and then a few minutes later looked up when a woman was walking toward them.

Chloe knew beyond a doubt it was her birth mother.

She had the same light brown hair as hers. The shape of their eyes was similar, even their builds. Both on the shorter side and not very big boned.

"Chloe?" Emily asked.

"That's me," she said, standing up. She put her hand out to shake. She wasn't one for hugs and it didn't feel right either. The handshake even felt awkward, but Emily continued to smile.

She hadn't asked Zander for a picture of Emily and wondered why she didn't. It was probably for the best anyway.

“You look just like my daughter, Crystal,” Emily said. “I’m sorry. That was insensitive.”

“It’s fine,” Chloe said. “Have a seat. I’ll be honest and let you know that I had a PI look into you so I know you’re married and that you’ve got a husband and two kids.” She stopped and then sat down. “I’m sorry. This is my boyfriend, Royce Kennedy.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Emily said. “It’s fine that you did that. I would have told you if you asked, but I’m not shocked you’d want to know more. I won’t take offense to that. I’ve got nothing to hide.”

She was glad to at least hear that. “That’s good to know. I’m not sure what I hope to find out. I mean I do know what I hope. Sorry. I’m rambling. We should order. Are you hungry?”

The server came over and took their drink orders and then gave them menus. She was starving but knew she was getting waffles and put it back down.

The silence was getting to her though. “You probably want to know why I reached out, correct?” Emily asked.

“I do. Why now after all this time?”

“I’ve been curious for years. I have a life and a family. I never stopped thinking of you but also know that you were well cared for. My husband, Curt, always knew about you. I didn’t want to surprise him with that information. But my kids didn’t know. I never really saw a reason to tell them. Unfortunately, Crystal overheard a conversation my mother was having with my father. I’m not sure why it was brought up about you, but she asked and I didn’t want to lie.”

“So your daughter is the reason that you sought me out?” she asked.

“Yes and no. It got me thinking. I told her and Corbin. That’s my son, but I’m guessing you know that if you looked into us. As I said, I’ve got nothing to hide.”

She’d see about that when she asked about her birth father. Her mother was right. So far nothing about Emily said this woman was loose and out sleeping with random men and wouldn’t know who the father was.

“I don’t either,” Chloe said. “I think I would have been content to go about my life and not know anything about you and your family. That probably sounds horrible, I know, but I was raised by my adopted parents. They loved me and gave me everything I could hope for.”

Emily’s eyes got a bit misty. “I’m glad. I talked to two couples back then and I knew you would be a good fit with them. They had your brother already and he seemed so well adjusted. I couldn’t give you the life you had.”

“I understand that. I’m not trying to be cruel with my words. I think things turned out the way they were meant. But Royce and I are expecting a child. It’s not common knowledge outside of our family, as I’m only out of the first trimester. But that being said, it got me thinking more about my personal medical history. That of my birth father’s too. I know his name wasn’t listed on the birth certificate.”

Emily sighed. “I figured this would be part of it. And I knew going in it would come up.”

“My mother said you didn’t know who the father was, but I’m not sure I believe that.”

“I do know who your father is. I never told anyone. He was older.”

This started to make more sense. “How much older?” Royce asked.

“Old enough to have been arrested due to my age and his,” Emily said. “I thought I was in love and found out he was just using me. I was naive, and due to the circumstances surrounding it, I kept quiet.”

“Did he know you were pregnant?” she asked.

“I told him. He wanted me to end the pregnancy. I didn’t want to do that. There are just so many people out there that could love my baby.”

She knew that had to be a very hard decision for Emily to make and was thankful that it’d been done. “My parents said your parents were in favor of the adoption?”

“They were,” Emily said. “I’m close with my parents, but I refused to give the father’s name up and that caused a lot of tension. I didn’t think I could raise you. I was heartbroken and wasn’t sure having you as a reminder was a good thing either. There is just so much that was involved back then.”

“Anything you are going to share with me?” she asked. “Would you be willing to let me know who he is now?”

“I talked to my husband about this prior. I had a feeling you’d want to know. Things could get very messy in my life and my children’s if the father’s name comes out.”

“I’m sorry for that,” Royce said. “And this is Chloe’s decision, but if there is something we need to know for our child’s sake we’d like that. I have the means and the friends to push more if I have to on this. I can protect Chloe too.”

She wanted to growl over that. She didn’t need anyone to protect her. “Royce,” she said. “I understand what you are

saying and doing. I love the support. Emily, you might not know much about me other than the basics.”

“No,” Emily said. “I didn’t even know you were dating Royce. If I decide to let you know this information, it’d make me feel better to know that you do have some protection. I know your employers are big names in Durham, but they are just your employers.”

She laughed. “Something like that.”

“It’s more,” Royce said. “My family owns Kennedy Construction. We are partners with Fierce Engineering, Olson Law Firm and McCarthy Construction. We know people in this area too and have the means and resources for a lot of things. We can handle anything that is thrown our way if Chloe is willing to find out.”

There was part of her that wasn’t so sure at this point though. “I need to think about this. I’m sure you do too. I don’t always like a lot of eyes on me and it sounds as if that will happen?”

“Yes and no,” Emily said. “You may not do anything with the name. That is up to you. But if you do, then it’s possible that could happen.”

“I’ll have to take that chance once I know more.”

Their food was delivered since they’d placed orders when their drinks were brought out. “Why don’t we eat and talk about something else,” Royce said.

“That’s a good idea. I’d think you might want to know more about me, but I could be wrong?”

“I’d like to know anything you want to tell me,” Emily said. “And if after this meal we don’t talk again, I’ll understand. My daughter will want to meet you. I can’t always

hold her back. I haven't told her your name or anything, but she's sneaky. She has a way of finding information."

Chloe laughed. "I'm used to being around sneaky persistent people."

"Our lives are that of strangers. I understand," Emily said. "Crystal is young and sometimes has stars in her eyes, but she'll listen to me too if you end up not wanting to go any further than just finding out some information."

She wasn't sure what she wanted. "I've got a family," she said. "And support. I'm not looking for another one."

Emily nodded her head. "I'm just happy to hear that you are doing so well in life. I'm not looking to disrupt what you've got or had coming. Please don't feel that way."

"Even though my child would technically be your grandchild?" she asked

Emily's eyes closed briefly. "I gave up all those rights over thirty years ago. I know that."

"That wasn't as bad as I thought it'd be," Chloe said over an hour later. "I didn't know what would happen."

"You still don't," he said. "She might decide to not give you the name. And if she does, it sounds like it could be a big deal in your life. What do you want to do?"

"I don't know," she said. "What I gathered is the guy is older and took advantage of a young girl. You heard her: he gave her money for her silence and an abortion. Her parents didn't even know about it."

"Yeah," he said. "It took her a while to come out and say that. That trail of money leads back to him though. And I'm

sure if her parents knew they would have figured out who he was. I can't believe she never told anyone."

"She told her husband," she said. "She used that money to get an education and then build a future."

Chloe didn't ask the amount and didn't care. It meant nothing to her.

"I know you weren't happy with what I said," he said.

"You were showing your support. It means a lot, but I don't need to drag you or your family into this. Very few even know I'm pregnant. That is going to just put the spotlight on so many things. Even if she gives me the name, I don't think I'll do anything with it just yet. If at all."

"That is for you to decide. But please, don't worry about me or our family. This is about you."

"It's about us," she said. "It has to be about us. I can't make any decision without you being part of it now."

"Nothing has to be decided now though. Just remember that."

She would try to, but there were just so many things going through her mind.

How the hell had life become this complicated?

WHAT WOULD BE WOULD BE

“I can’t believe I missed your engagement,” Chloe said to Megan at the end of May. They’d shown up for a Memorial Day party at the Fierces. She was moving a little slow this morning and got here late.

She wasn’t showing with the baby other than looking like she’d put a few pounds on, but she and Royce decided last week to let everyone know.

There wasn’t going to be a good time to do it or an easy way either. They had to just pull the Band-Aid off and she started with Raina and Megan and then told Jade.

Jade thought it was a riot and congratulated her. But she wanted to find out if there was any way that wasn’t embarrassing about letting Grant and Garrett know.

Then she wondered why she cared. She wasn’t embarrassed she was having a baby with Royce. She was happy and almost moved into his house completely.

The only thing she wasn’t happy about was that she hadn’t heard from Emily yet about her biological father’s name. But she wasn’t going to push. It was out there and what would be would be.

“I can’t believe you’re pregnant,” Megan said. She’d said that a few times in the past few days too.

“Guess life just happens that way sometimes. I didn’t think Jonah would propose in front of everyone.”

“It wasn’t everyone,” Megan said. “The party hadn’t started much yet and it explains why we showed up earlier than I thought we were going to. It feels like life is just falling into place for us all.”

Megan grabbed her hands and started to jump up and down again like she’d done earlier when she came running to her to show her the ring.

“It’s still exciting,” she said.

“How are you feeling? You look tired.”

“Thanks,” Chloe said. “They said this is normal. Otherwise, I feel great though.”

“I’m glad. And you are almost moved into Royce’s. And Jonah and I are moving into his house soon too.”

“Your wedding will be next. Raina will have a baby soon or at least be trying. She doesn’t have much longer to finish school.”

“I bet your wedding is next,” Megan said.

“Let’s not rush things. I’m not someone to get married just because of a baby.”

“Of course not,” Jade said, moving over. “But you love Royce and it’s the next step. Just because my father and uncle know you’re all but living together and having a baby, doesn’t mean they are ready to let up anytime soon either. Until they see that ring on a finger, they don’t think their work is done.”

“For now, their work is done,” she said.

Chloe moved around the party some more. Royce had been mingling with a lot of people. It was nice they didn’t have to be glued to each other the whole time. It almost reminded her of the few parties they’d been to together when they were trying to keep their relationship a secret.

Guess after acknowledging the relationship was there nothing else really changed. She would have never thought that could happen months ago.

“Chloe,” Diane Fierce said, moving toward her. She was talking to Raina now. “I haven’t had a chance to come and congratulate you on the baby.”

“Thanks,” she said. She wasn’t sure she should get congratulations like others would. This wasn’t planned and it’s not like she was married. “Lots of surprises this year. But of course you know all about that.”

“We do,” Carolyn said, rushing to join them. “The guys told us they had this one covered, but we didn’t think they did. You were giving them fits and Diane and I had a good laugh about it.”

“Glad to provide some entertainment for you guys,” she said. She wouldn’t take offense to this. She knew there was no harm.

“I just love how straightforward you are,” Diane said. “You and Megan have rubbed off on Raina.”

“They have,” Raina said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to have a baby any time soon.”

Diane and Carolyn looked at each other. “It was worth a try,” Carolyn said. “I heard you and Royce are living together now?”

“We are getting there,” she said. “No ring on the finger any time soon though. One step at a time.”

“You know we can’t give up,” Diane said. “But we are happy to see everything working out.”

“Come on now,” she said. “Even you two couldn’t have known it would work out like this.”

“No,” Carolyn said. “But you aren’t the first couple we’ve matched up that found a baby on the way before an engagement.”

She’d heard about Mick and Lindsey. It was hard not to hear about all the matches. “And they married before the baby was born,” she said. “They look so cute over there with Ava too.”

“I sense some sarcasm there,” Carolyn said. “We’ll let you store that up for our husbands. Don’t go light on them.”

“That was funny,” Raina said as the two women walked away laughing. “They do have fun doing this.”

“I know they do,” Chloe said. “I never liked anyone telling me how to run my life before.”

She still didn’t, which was why she was pushing everything with Emily out of her head.

“I don’t think too many of us do. Oh look, here comes your baby daddy.”

“Wise ass,” she said to Raina, grinning.

“That is what he is though, right?” Raina said, giggling and moving to another group of people.

“Chloe, I’m not sure if you’ve officially met Walker Olson,” Royce said.

“I have not,” she said. “Though I’ve heard plenty about you and your circumstances with Stella.”

Walker laughed. “They know what they are doing even when we don’t want to admit it.”

“So I’m finding out,” she said. “It is nice to meet you though. I’m normally only dealing with the construction end, but that big commercial building has been a lot of fun to work on.”

Royce pulled her next to his side. “For more reasons than work too,” he said.

“Here comes my father, Robert. You might as well meet all the players,” Walker said.

Chloe wasn’t sure why he said that unless everyone was just making this out to be a done deal she’d be Royce’s wife and since he was a partner with them, it affected her somehow.

She shook hands with Robert Olson, talked a bit, and had some laughs. Then Richard came over. “I see you met Royce’s girl,” Royce’s father said. “Isn’t she a gem?”

“I was called a gem when you got your head together with Grant and Garrett to set me up,” she said, laughing.

“Don’t feel bad,” Walker said. “My father and mother were in on it too.”

“There is no hiding once they lock onto their targets, is there?” she asked.

“No,” Royce said. “I think we have figured that out too.”

A few minutes later they were left standing there alone. “I know what you’re doing,” she said.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“You want me to meet them because of what could happen with Emily. Admit it.”

He let out a sigh. “We don’t know what is going to happen. You haven’t heard anything. And you haven’t asked.”

“I’m not going to ask again. I don’t like pressure on me. Maybe I got that from her. I have to trust she knows what she is doing and why. Also, do I want more drama in my life? What does it change if I know? I’m a healthy person and that should be all that matters.”

“That is all that matters to me,” he said. “But if you get the information and you pursue it, it doesn’t hurt to know there are people in your corner.”

“Did you say anything to them?” she asked with her hands on her hips.

He reached for her fingers and put her hands down. “No. I wouldn’t do that. It’s not my place to either. You know that. But you should meet them because you are part of my life and they are too. A working relationship, but they still are.”

Which was exactly what she figured.

“It’s going to be what it’s going to be,” she said. “Can we just enjoy this party? I’m glad Megan got engaged so it doesn’t seem as if all eyes are on us. I even thanked Jonah for doing it today.”

“What did he say?” he asked.

“He said anything to help out a friend of Megan’s,” she said. “Plus I think he was thrilled there was something else people were talking about today besides his engagement.”

“It seems to me everyone here has been in our shoes so it’s not as bad,” he said.

“No, it’s not. Let’s get some food. Baby is hungry.”

Royce put his hand on her belly. He did that a lot. “Then let’s feed my kid.”



“LOOK AT THE TWO OF THEM,” Richard said to Grant.

“They are a striking couple. Can’t wait to find out if they are having a boy or a girl. What’s your money on?” Garrett said.

“Is there anything you two don’t bet on?” he asked.

“It’s no fun to not at least try,” Grant said. “I think it’s going to be a boy. Nice strong genes in your family, Richard.”

“I say a boy too,” Garrett said.

“Girl,” Richard said. “Royce is going to get a girl first. Then he’ll have a boy another time.”

“Planning on more kids in the future?” Garrett asked. “Don’t you want to get that ring on her finger first?”

“Royce will do it when he’s ready,” he said. “I’ve learned not to push him. Life is too short.”

“It is,” Grant said. “And how are you feeling?”

“Almost good as new,” he said. “I plan on staying that way too so I can see this grandchild and many more. Seems your work is falling into place too. Another engagement earlier?”

“Megan and Jonah. That one was tough too. Jonah was the stubborn one there. Megan was easy to work with. She wanted our help,” Grant said proudly.

“Not everyone does,” Richard said.

“Nope,” Garrett said. “But I can’t wait to tell my brother and sister-in-law in Charlotte tonight and let them know the good news about the engagement.”

“Do they know about the baby?” he asked.

“I did tell them a few days ago,” Garrett said.

“Garrett isn’t good at sitting on news,” Grant said. “But we do have to share our progress. Sometimes we all need a little help to get things moving.”

“As my son found out,” he said. Now he just had to try and figure out what else was going on because he knew Royce well enough to know there was more that he wasn’t being told.

GOING TO REACT

““**W**hat’s your guess?” Royce asked Chloe when they showed up at the doctor for the ultrasound three weeks later.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Do you have a preference? I just hope the baby is cooperating.”

“No preference,” he said. “As long as it’s healthy that is all I’ve ever cared about.”

Chloe was starting to show more. Her clothes were tighter and not a lot fit her. She didn’t really need maternity clothes yet and he’d noticed her frustration in her wardrobe but just kept his opinions to himself.

He told her to go shopping or he’d take her shopping. She’d seemed stunned by the offer and laughed at him, but she did end up going one day because he noticed the bags when he’d gotten home from work late one night.

And as busy as he was, there was no way he was missing this appointment. He wanted to be on them all with her but knew that wasn’t going to happen. There was no need either.

“I feel the same way,” she said. “Once we know I guess we can start working on names and figure out the nursery.”

He'd been waiting to start talking about those things too. He was itching to get the house ready and was a little surprised by how excited he was over this.

Months ago he didn't even think he could handle the time for a relationship and yet here he was getting ready for a baby in the fall.

Chloe checked in at the desk and they took their seat. "I've got to pee so badly. I hope I don't have to wait too long to get seen."

"I wish I could help you, but there isn't much I can do about it other than try to intimidate the woman at the desk to get you in faster."

"No, thank you," she said.

They didn't have long to wait before Chloe was called back. She lay on the table and lifted her shirt. He still couldn't get over the bump and that his child was in there.

Listening to the heartbeat was amazing to him but seeing this was going to be more.

"I'm Nancy and we're going to take a bunch of pictures of the baby. Do you want to know the sex today if the baby cooperates?"

"We do," Chloe said.

"I'm going to warm the gel up for you a little and if the baby is sleeping I'll try to wake him or her up," Nancy said.

Chloe reached for his hand and held it while Nancy put the gel on her belly and started to move it around. They listened as different organs and parts were pointed out and pictures were taken, but to him it looked like a little alien. He knew enough

to not say that though because he was already in love with his little alien.

“Looks like the legs are wide open,” Royce said. “Or am I looking at something else?”

“Nope, you’re right,” Nancy said. “And as you can tell there isn’t much between the legs and you’re having a little girl.”

“Yes,” he said doing a fist pump.

Chloe turned and looked at him. “You said you didn’t care.”

“I don’t care,” he said. “I would have reacted that way with a boy too.” He knew his smile was filling his face. He couldn’t help it.

Chloe just laughed. “I feel the same. It just seems so much more real now,” she said. “Everything else is okay?”

“The baby is measuring slightly bigger than average, but since her father is a big man, that makes sense. The doctor will get these results and talk about it at your next visit.”

“What does that mean if the baby is big?” Royce asked.

“Nothing really. But since Chloe isn’t a big person they will determine if she can give birth naturally or not. You’d know the sizes of the people in your family. Maybe you were a big baby but not a big person now,” Nancy said to Chloe.

He saw Chloe close her eyes. “I was a little over seven pounds my mother said.”

“I was ten pounds ten ounces,” he said proudly. “My father told me the other day.”

“Urgh,” she said. “And you’re just sharing this now? Good lord. You’re not the one pushing this kid out. How big was Elise? Maybe the girls are smaller?”

“Elise was over ten pounds too but not as big as me,” he said. “Sorry.”

“It is what it is,” she said.

She pulled her shirt down and Royce helped her off the table. “All good?” he asked. “Happy?”

“I am,” she said.

They left and were back in his truck. He was going to bring her to work and get back to the site. “I have to call my father and tell him,” he said.

“I’m going to call my mother and father and let them know. Then I’ll text Dane. I know they are going to be asking at work too. Guess we can start to plan her room now more too.”

“If you want to,” he said.

“We can talk it over tonight,” she said.

“You’re quiet,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“Knowing I’m having a daughter now, I guess I’m thinking of Emily and what she went through. I don’t want my daughter to think she can’t tell me something. Or even think she might be taken advantage of by anyone. Let alone an older man.”

Those thoughts had been going through his brain a lot too. “Finding out the name of your father isn’t going to change those things. We’ll just have to make sure that our daughter knows she can come to us for anything.”

“I know. And we will. I’m thinking of reaching out to Emily one more time. It’s been over a month. I guess I just want closure if she is going to tell me or not so I can move on.”

“Do you think you’re going to get any closure until you know?” he asked.

“Probably not. But at least I can say I tried. I’ll only ask one more time and then I have to move on.”

“Are you sure it has nothing to do with the fact that the tech made a comment about the size of the babies on your side of the family?”

He’d seen her reaction over that. “I’m used to things like that. Or I thought I was. You just never know how you’re going to react until you get to this position in life. Let’s put it behind us and call our parents.”

They both did. His father was laughing and said he called it all along and was thrilled. Elise was in his father’s office so he was able to let them both know.

He heard Chloe on the phone with her mother, then there was silence as her mother was talking some more. The smile was gone from Chloe’s face.

When she hung up, he asked, “What’s going on?”

“She said Emily reached out to her a few days ago and she didn’t want to tell me but decided to.”

“Really?” he asked. “I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“I’m not either. But I can see that side of it too. Emily explained what was going on. That she’d told her parents who the father was finally after all this time. I guess there is a lot of

drama right now and my mother doesn't know it all, but she wanted my parents to know and be prepared."

"Prepared for what?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. I don't like being in the dark about these things. She said Emily told my mother to tell me when she felt I was ready and for me to reach out. She felt my mother would know what was best."

"Does your mother know who the guy is?" he asked.

"No. So my mother is just as anxious and curious too, but she wasn't going to say anything until after the ultrasound. She knew we were excited and she didn't want anything to ruin this."

He had to admit that Chloe's parents did do right by their children more often than not. He should probably take a page from them on how to raise his child because his mother sure the hell wouldn't have waited. She would have been causing more drama.

"Now what?" he asked.

"I'm going back to work. I'm going to be happy about the baby and let everyone know and tonight you and I can call Emily together."

"Then that is what we'll do," he said.

He drove her to her office, gave her a kiss and then left to return to his office.

He didn't like the fact that something could disrupt his life, and though he knew he could carry the weight of this, he was going to let his father and sister know too.

Chloe never said it was a secret that she was adopted or talked to Emily. She never asked him to not tell anyone.

He just hoped she wasn't too ticked off, but something told him they might need everyone in their corner for support and he was damn well going to be there for her.

COME TO TERMS

“How was your afternoon?” Royce asked her when he came in the door a little after six.

Chloe was surprised he was home so early knowing how busy he was, but when he texted he was calling it a day, she decided to make sure dinner was done so they could eat and talk.

“It was good. I called Emily an hour ago,” she said.

“I thought you were going to wait until I got home and we could talk about this together?” he asked.

“Why are you ticked?” she asked.

“I didn’t think you’d do it without me is all,” he said.

“I understand that, but I couldn’t wait. This is my life. This part of it. I couldn’t wait any longer and I needed to do it alone. I don’t always need you to stand in front of me.”

This was part of the reason she did what she had. It’s not like she wasn’t going to give him the information she found out.

If she thought afterward this made her selfish, she didn’t care. It was one of those things she just had to decide on and did.

“If it’s going to affect our child I’m damn well going to stand in front of you. And since you are carrying her you don’t need to be stressed either.”

She let out a sigh. She wanted to argue with him but couldn’t. “Sit down and we’ll talk. I’ll tell you what she said to me.”

“Did you get a name?” he asked.

“I did. No one you know or I even know, but you’ll understand when I explain the situation.”

“I’m listening,” he said.

“Can we talk and eat?” she asked. “I’m hungry and dinner is almost done.”

She could see he was hesitating but finally said, “I’ll go take a shower first, then we’ll talk and eat.”

“Thanks for that. I’m not hiding anything from you. I wouldn’t do that. I’m gathering my thoughts.”

He nodded his head and then went to take a shower and she finished with the pasta that was cooking, draining it out and then putting the sauce and meatballs over it. A simple dinner, but she wanted a lot of pasta lately for some reason.

“Anything I can help you with?” he asked, coming in.

“No, I’ve got it. It’s all set.”

He grabbed a beer out of the fridge and came and sat, the two of them filling their plates. “When we are done talking about this, I thought we could talk about the nursery. I’ve been looking at things too.”

“Really?” he asked.

“Yes. I guess I didn’t get much work done. Everyone was talking to me and Jade was showing me things she was doing for her daughter’s nursery. Ryder showed me pictures of Riley’s room.”

“Are you thinking pink?”

“No,” she said. “At least not for the whole room. I’ll show you things when we are done. I’ll tell you about Emily’s call first.”

“Go ahead,” he said. “Take your time.”

“His name means nothing at the moment. Jason Henry. He was thirty-four years old and married. He was an attorney at the law firm that Emily’s mother worked at.”

“Wow,” he said. “Definitely knows better from a legal standpoint. How did he meet Emily? How did her mother not even know this?”

“Emily was working there that summer. That is how she met him. He flirted with her and one thing led to another. I didn’t ask and don’t care about those facts. Emily knew he was married and he said he was going to leave his wife.”

“Grown women fall for that, I’m sure a sixteen-year-old just ate it up,” he said.

“She did. She regrets it. He wanted her to have an abortion. She didn’t obviously. But she never told him she wasn’t going to. He paid her money to keep her quiet on top of the money for the abortion. You know those things. A few months later he moved out of the area.”

“Sounds like running to me,” he said.

“Could be. Emily said she was hurt and didn’t want to hear his name let alone look into him. There was no reason to ask

about him. She tried to wipe it all from her mind.”

It hurt to hear those things. But Chloe told herself she couldn't feel that way. She'd come to terms with her life and how it played out.

She'd been happy for years and she wasn't going to let something that happened to her years ago bring her down now. She had no control then, but she could continue things going forward.

“It had to be hard for her.”

“I can't put myself in her shoes.”

“Why does she think there will be a lot of drama?” he asked. “I'm not sure what I'm missing unless you want to see him and then he will say it's false or defamation?”

“It could be those things. Or she could have worried he'd do that. I don't believe he can be charged with anything at this point, but it wouldn't look good for him or his life to know he got a sixteen-year-old pregnant when he was thirty-four. His life would be ruined. All I'd have to do is try to get a DNA test to prove it. Emily has the information from the money sent to her. There is a trail for sure.”

“If you want to pursue it,” he said. “Or maybe he'd think you'd blackmail him?”

“All those things came into my head until I found out what the big drama is. I think that is what Emily felt might happen too. Now I'm not sure that is what he would be thinking of.”

“Don't keep me in suspense,” he said.

“When Emily told her mother, there was a lot of shock. She said her mother knew there was flirting going on and told Jason it was inappropriate. Emily didn't know anything of this.

I guess Emily's mother went to her boss and Jason was spoken to and that was part of the reason he left."

"But Emily's mother never put it together Jason was the father?"

"I don't think she believed Jason would have sex with a minor. And Emily wasn't giving up the name. But Stacy, that is Emily's mother, she never spoke of Jason again because she was just happy he was gone."

"And now that Stacy knows Jason was the father?"

"I guess Stacy told Emily that Jason moved back to the area a few years ago. He's divorced now and works at another practice. He has a three-year-old grandson that is battling leukemia. It was brought up a month ago in the office where her mother still works. Jason is doing everything he can to find a family member that could be a donor match."

"Oh fuck no," he said.

She lifted her eyebrow. "That would be my choice and not yours, Royce." Not that she didn't think the same thing.

"Chloe. You're pregnant. This guy took advantage of a sixteen-year-old girl. Let's call it what it is. He raped her."

"I know all those things. I really do. But there is a three-year-old that is sick and innocent right now."

"You need to think of yourself and our baby."

"I am. I will. I did some research and found that you don't have to be a family member to be a donor. You just need to find someone to be a match. I don't follow those things so I had no idea. Emily said Jason is very condescending and wants it kept within his family. If he knew I was out there, he'd be knocking on my door."

“My door,” he said. “He’d have to get past me. There is no way he is either.”

“Royce,” she said firmly.

“Chloe. No. This guy asked a sixteen-year-old to end her pregnancy. Then he left when he thought he’d get in trouble. He never once followed up if she did or not. Nothing. If his grandson wasn’t sick it sounds like he’d do everything Emily thought originally and cause a problem for you if you said he was the father. You don’t need him in your life.”

“No, I don’t. I have to come to peace with this myself. I’m not jumping on anything. I have to ask myself what I hoped to gain by knowing him.”

“That’s right. What do you hope to get out of this?”

“I don’t know. But I do know I’m going to fill my belly and then we are going to talk about our baby girl’s nursery. Can we just do that?”

She knew he didn’t want to end this, but he sighed and said, “Sure. We can do that.”

WIN THEM OVER

“Does everyone have what they need?” Royce asked both sides of the family on the Fourth of July.

He and Chloe figured it was time that they got both sides together to meet. For him, he wanted the woman he loved to know he was all in and he was going to say it in front of her family.

For Chloe, she was ready to let everyone know where she stood with Jason. Everyone was fully aware of the situation but stayed back to let her make her decision.

He knew Dane gave her an earful but then helped her try to understand from a medical perspective. Everyone had an opinion, himself included, but it did have to come down to Chloe.

He knew what was decided and he supported it, but he had to let her come to this on her own.

He looked around at Chloe’s parents. They’d gotten a tour of the house and were impressed. Normally he didn’t care so much if people were impressed, but he was trying to win them over.

There was some guilt on his shoulders that he'd been so busy and getting home late. He knew her family was aware too. It'd been brought up a few times too. The last thing he wanted was for anyone to say he wasn't there to help.

He heard that enough from his mother and was sick of it. He stopped taking her calls. She wanted to meet Chloe and for now he needed a break from the drama and told her so. If she wanted to meet his girlfriend she could drive her ass here and his mother refused.

"I'm set," Elise said. "We all have drinks and there is plenty of food. The kids are playing in the backyard. You'll have to build a swing set next summer."

He looked out at Tiffani and Tyler playing with some of the lawn games he purchased. He'd been thinking about a swing set too, but it'd wait for now.

"I'll have fun designing one," Chloe said. "It can be an entire jungle gym."

"That sounds like fun," Dane said. "I might have to have you do one at my house too."

"Chloe and I both have things we want to say today. It's best that we do it all at once with both families here," he said.

His father lifted an eyebrow at him but didn't say a word. There would be no surprises on his side of the family, as they knew what was going on. His part couldn't have happened without their approval and support, which Elise and his father readily gave.

"I'll go first," Chloe said. "I appreciate everyone giving me time to figure out what to do with this situation with Jason. Dane, more so you for answering all my questions. I've decided to just ignore the fact of Jason being my father. His

name isn't on the birth certificate and to me that was a sign it should stay blank in my life."

Royce saw her parents let out a sigh. Elise was smiling, his father nodding his head. "But I told Chloe that I will support her if she changes her mind at any point."

"We all will," her father said.

"Emily and Jason are just names to me," Chloe said. "My family is right here. I always knew that and never felt I was missing anything in life. I shouldn't have let it get into my head, but I think when you find out you're going to be a parent you start to second-guess everything."

He knew that feeling well. "We all make mistakes," his father said. "And we have to learn from them. Sometimes you can't tell someone something either. They have to experience it themselves to fully understand."

"Tell me about it," Dane said.

"For now, his name is just going to be locked away. I don't want that in my life. I don't like the person he is. I don't have him in me. I'm not one of those people that thinks that. I had to remind myself of it too. We all have some bad genes in us, but that doesn't mean something bad is going to happen. And if it does, then I've got the support of everyone here."

Doreen started to cry and Chloe got up to go hug her. "We never wanted you to feel as if you weren't enough, Chloe. But we didn't want you to feel as if you couldn't find out more either."

"I know that," she said. "I appreciate it. I think there were times in my life when I wondered if you thought I wasn't good enough because I didn't make the same decisions as you. Or

didn't think the same way? Were you wondering if it's because of who I came from?"

"Never," Mark said. "Not for either of my kids."

Dane was looking at Chloe. Royce could see the siblings did think this, so he said, "I know who my mother is. I talk to her when I have to. She doesn't agree with anything I've done in my life. Knowing who birthed you doesn't mean you will be close. It doesn't mean they will treat you differently or that you will be like them. Elise and I are proof of that."

"Damn straight," Elise said.

He laughed at his sister.

"I know that," Chloe said. "What the future holds with Emily, I don't know. We are leaving it up in the air. She isn't going to pressure me, but her daughter, Crystal, would like to meet at some point. I said that I would let them know when it works. There are just a lot of things going on in my life right now and I need to focus on me. I'm not going to let the guilt of a three-year-old needing a donor get to me either. I'm sure there are thousands of people out there waiting for donors. Jason and his grandson are strangers to me just as the others are. We all know I'm selfish and I'm going to continue to be. This is about me and Royce and our baby."

"As it should be," her mother said. "And we are sorry if we ever made you feel as if you weren't enough or to doubt yourself. You've always been ours regardless of who carried and birthed you. I know you know that."

"I did then and I do even more now," she said.

Once Chloe was seated again, Royce sat next to her. "It's my turn. I guess we are going to air things out today for both

our families.” He turned to Chloe. “I know I’ve been gone a lot with work.”

“It’s the nature of your job. I know that. I don’t have a problem with it.”

“You say that now, but the closer you get to the baby being born you might not mean it. Besides, I mind. I have a problem with it. I’m not going to miss things in my child’s life. This week Dad and Elise and I sat down to restructure things. We are just growing so much. I want my father here for a long time and there is no reason he needs to take on more. He wants to enjoy his granddaughter too.”

“I’d like to enjoy my niece,” Elise said. “And who knows? Maybe someday I’ll have my own kid.”

“One can only hope,” his father said.

“As I was saying,” he said, “we are going to hire a project manager. Someone to help oversee things so I’m not running everywhere. I’m not doing as much hands-on work even though I enjoy it. But I’m pulled in all directions at all times with lots of jobs. Having someone else take over some of those jobs will help tremendously.”

“That’s great,” Chloe said. “But I don’t want you to have to do that for me.”

“I said I was doing it for me. For you. For our child. I know you like your space. I won’t infringe on it. But wouldn’t it be nice if I was in the house to take care of the baby so you can have some time to yourself to binge-watch TV?”

“Or knit,” she said, laughing.

“You knit?” her mother asked her.

“No,” she said, snorting. “It’s a private joke. So we both said what we needed to. Why did you say this now?”

“Because it’s important to me that your family knows that I’m here for you too.”

She smiled at him. “I think they know if I wanted you here more I’d tell you right to your face.”

“She would,” Dane said.

“And with a smile on her face,” her father said.

“Good to know.”

“Then I think we can move onto the last part before Royce starts to grill. We’ve decided on a name for our daughter.”

“I was hoping that was soon,” Elise said. “Don’t keep us in suspense!”

“Willow Grey Kennedy. We aren’t hyphenating the last names. Her middle name will be Grey. I know it’s a boy’s name.”

“It can be a name for anyone,” her mother said. “It’s very pretty. How did you settle on it?”

“Royce and I have been looking at designs for the baby’s room. For Willow’s room. I’m drawn to gray and soft colors. I saw this pretty white and gray willow wallpaper. Very feminine but not over the top female.”

“It was almost immediately that we both said, what do you think about Willow?” he said.

He was still shaking his head over that. Guess it was meant to be and now he just had to get Chloe to see she was meant to be his wife. Not today, though he was already in the process of having the ring made.

Best not to have too many things happening in one day.

“That’s such a sweet story,” her mother said. “One you can share with your daughter someday too.”

“We’ll have a lot of stories to share with her,” Chloe said, winking at him.

He felt his face blush. “Not all of them,” he said.

EPILOGUE

T *hree Months Later*

TIME WAS FLYING and it was just about five weeks before Willow was going to be born. He was running out of time to get that ring on Chloe's finger even though he'd had it in his possession for months.

After a lot of debating on how to do this, he figured this was the only way.

He knocked on Chloe's door to her office Monday morning. He had to pick up some blueprints. She said she was going to bring them home tonight, but why bother?

"Hey," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"Getting the blueprints," he said. "I wasn't that far from here. How are you doing?"

"I want to say I've done better. This kid knows exactly where my bladder is and wants to pop a squat on it nonstop."

He laughed at her. "One of those things I can't help you with."

“I know,” she said, shifting in her chair and standing up. “But you asked.”

“I did. Just tell me where they are, and I’ll grab them.”

“No. I need to get up and move, you know that. Otherwise, my ankles swell too.”

“You look beautiful to me,” he said.

“Isn’t that so sweet,” Grant said from the hallway.

He turned to see the brothers standing there. He’d passed them on his way to Chloe’s office and said he was going to see her. He knew they’d come down, being the nosy men they were.

No one had been putting pressure on them about getting married. He was surprised, to be honest, but brushed it off.

“It is nice,” Garrett said. “I used to rub Carolyn’s feet every night toward the end.”

“As you should have,” Chloe said. “She carried twins. Twice. No way. One is bad enough.”

“Since you are both here,” Royce said to Grant and Garrett, “I thought it’d be the perfect time to bring up a new proposition.”

“Oh,” Grant said. “Did you and your father find another property?”

“Nothing like that,” he said. “This is a proposition for Chloe. I thought you might enjoy hearing it. She’s good at coming up with them, but this time I think I need to be the one to come up with this one.”

He turned to Chloe and saw her face turn red. “Royce.”

He laughed. “Hey. It had to start somewhere, right?”

“What are we missing?” Garrett asked.

“Nothing,” Chloe said. “Royce likes to come up with rules. Or change them.”

“Me?” Royce said, putting his hand to his chest. “No. That is you. I have to change them true, but you’ve got plenty of your own. And you’re stalling.”

He moved closer to where she was standing when the brothers walked in. She hadn’t moved to get the blueprints.

He got down on one knee. “Oh my God,” she said.

“It had to be here,” he said. “You know it as well as I do. It’s where we first met years ago.”

“It took you two long enough,” Garrett said.

“Hush,” Grant said. “Let him get the ring on her finger.”

He wasn’t paying attention to the Fierces just now. Just the woman he loved. “It did take us a long time, but it was meant to be. Will you be my wife? You’re already living with me. You’re carrying my baby. I know we took things out of order and all.”

She grinned at him. “You started so good and then ended that way. But it’s fine. I’m good with the way we did things. Yes, I’ll be your wife. Just another story to tell our daughter.”

He slid the ring on her finger and stood up to pull her into his arms. “And many more we’re going to make in the future!”



“WHAT IS it you’ve got to tell us?” Carolyn said into the phone ten minutes later. “That you had to get Diane and me on at the same time.”

Garrett looked at his brother. “We did it. Without your help too,” he told his wife. “I know you told Chloe to play with us, but she didn’t.”

“Did what?” Diane asked.

“Royce just proposed to Chloe here in the office. It was beautiful,” Grant said.

His brother could be sentimental at times too. “Are you kidding me?” Carolyn screeched. “Finally!”

“I was wondering if it was going to happen,” Grant said. “It’s been hard not to push them, but Richard told us to hold back and we had to honor it. He said he felt like he knew his son and that he needed to do it on his own.”

He and Grant had wanted to start dropping hints but decided that this was just one of those relationships that had to work its way out on its own. And it did.

“We all know our kids. I’m surprised you two actually listened,” Diane said.

He turned his head and saw Royce and Chloe standing there laughing. Royce said, “Now I know why everyone backed off.”

“It didn’t take you two long to start spreading the news,” Chloe said.

“Congratulations,” Diane and Carolyn both shouted into the phone.

Chloe and Royce moved past them and Garrett figured it was to go and spread the news before he and his brother could do it. He supposed it was only fair to let them. He’d call Jolene and Gavin tonight and let them know the good news too.

Once they were off the phone with their wives, he turned to his brother. “Now what? We had two working at once and it’s over. It doesn’t seem right.”

“It’s never over,” Grant said. “Give it time and the next will come to us. We can sit back and watch Jolene and Gavin struggling with Faith. You know Gavin took more of an interest in this one.”

“That’s true. They like to pick on us, but Gavin seems to have had more to do with the two girls in the family. We can rub his face in it over him being rusty later tonight,” Grant said.

“He might have started all this years ago, but we are catching up and becoming damn good at it.”

TO BE CONTINUED FOR...FAITH O’Malley. (Jolene Fierce’s niece)

SAWYER BRENNAN HAS a massive distrust of women thanks to his mother. Though he’s got lots of examples of good solid relationships in his life, he can’t move past what he knows and experienced. The fact that two of those examples—his grandparents and the Fierces—are working together to set him up doesn’t make a difference to him either.

FAITH O’MALLEY IS the last of Jolene Fierce’s immediate family left standing. She’s determined to hold out the longest. But a chance meeting with a sexy detective has her thinking maybe being single out of spite isn’t worth it. Until she finds

out that fate is working on her aunt's side and Sawyer is the man they had picked out for her. Now she just has to make sure everyone knows she did this on her own...and get them to believe it.

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