



HER BEST KEPT  
**SECRET**

NAIMA SIMONE

MILLS & BOON  
*Desire*

*USA TODAY* bestselling author **NAIMA SIMONE**'s love of romance was first stirred by Harlequin books pilfered from her grandmother. Now she spends her days writing sizzling romances with a touch of humor and snark.

She is wife to her own real-life superhero and mother to two awesome kids. They live in perfect domestically challenged bliss in the southern United States.

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# **Her Best Kept Secret**

**Naima Simone**

MILLS & BOON

[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

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## *That voice. She knew that voice.*

And if she hadn't immediately recognized it, the shiver skipping its way down her spine would've notified her of the person's identity.

Deliberately, she turned away from the partying guests and met a piercing pair of such light gray eyes they almost appeared silver. The intensity and beauty matched the voice. Hell, it matched everything about Joaquin Iverson.

He shifted, an infinitesimal amount forward, but it was enough to nearly dwarf her. Because goddamn, the man was huge.

From across the length of the wide room, she couldn't have gauged the breadth of shoulders and chest that any Seahawks linebacker would envy. Couldn't have guessed the looming height that had her suddenly feeling tiny and delicate, a feat that had never occurred before. Couldn't have surmised the power that emanated from his thick muscled arms and thighs, with a simple white dress shirt and dark dress pants clinging to them like shameless groupies. And at some point, he'd rolled back the sleeves, revealing corded forearms liberally covered in tattoos, and even more crept up toward the base of his throat.

Once more, her breath did that curious and irritating phenomenon where it evaporated into nothingness.

Dear Reader,

It's so exciting starting a new series! Exciting and, *fine*, a little scary. There's just something about creating a world, introducing new characters and becoming invested in their happily-ever-afters that's exhilarating. And those very same things are just a wee bit terrifying.

This duet features best friends Nore Daniels and Tatum Haas, who are celebrating Tatum's upcoming wedding with a girls' trip to Vegas. This trip—and finding a beautiful brooch with a legend attached to it—kicks off their journeys to finding love.

Event planner Nore indulges in a one-night stand only to discover the man she surrendered to passion with is her ex-fiancé's estranged brother. Oh yes, things are getting hot and messy. To make them even more complicated—note the aforementioned *messy*—Joaquin Iverson becomes her client in the business she reluctantly runs with her former fiancé. Keeping their night together a secret is a must, yet hiding her desire and not falling back into bed—or on a couch—with him is far more difficult.

Nore and Joaquin are combustible and I hope you fall in love with them even as they take the plunge. Welcome to the girls' trip duet!

*Naima*



To Gary. 143.

To Connie Marie Butts.  
I'll miss you forever  
and love you longer than that.

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## About the Publisher

## One

“A pawnshop? Did you really bring me to a pawnshop?”

Lenora—or “Nore,” as she never answered to anyone if they dared to call her by that godforsaken name—Daniels loosed an evil cackle as Tatum Haas, her best friend and future bride-to-be, stared up at the neon green block letters pronouncing the nature of the store.

Okay, gaped.

Her friend gaped.

“I believe the sign says ‘Awn Sho.’” Nore cocked her head, wrinkling her nose in mock confusion. “I’m not exactly sure what kind of performance that entails since I don’t know what an ‘awn’ is but you think Britney Spears will be included?”

“For the love of...” Tatum sighed, the cultured, proper notes of New England in her voice not concealing her annoyance. At all. “If you insist on bringing me to a pawnshop—and I still don’t know why—you can’t at least find one that can afford *all* the letters in its name? We’re in Las Vegas. Isn’t this like the pawnshop capital of the United States?”

“Uh, Houston is actually the pawnshop capital of America,” Nore corrected. “As of last count, it has 128 stores.”

Tatum snorted and somehow it still sounded elegant. “How do you even know that fact?”

“One does not aim to be a *Jeopardy!* contestant and *not* know those facts.” Nore shrugged, swiping at a bead of sweat that rolled down her temple.

She mock-glared at Tatum, who stood under the same vicious, I’m-a-make-you-my-bitch June sun and didn’t even *glisten*. They must teach that in the finishing school for Boston belles that Tatum had attended.

“No, really, what are we doing here? I thought we were headed to dinner at the Honey Salt and then Cirque du Soleil,” Tatum said, shuffling back on the sidewalk toward the parking lot.

Nore reached out, encircling her wrist and halting her friend’s retreat even as her stomach rumbled for the caramelized sea scallops and charred filet mignon at the popular Vegas restaurant.

“Not so fast. We have business here. And you mean *Magic Mike Live*, not Cirque du Soleil.” She arched an eyebrow and tugged her friend forward. “This is a girls-trip-slash-pre-bachelorette-party after all. What kind of best friend or maid of honor would I be if I didn’t take you to see hot strippers? But first things first.”

With that, Nore grabbed the handle on the pawnshop front door and pulled. Before Tatum could utter another protest, she entered, hauling her friend behind her.

This wasn’t Nore’s first pawnshop, but it was definitely her biggest. And her bargain/haggler heart just soared. Cases and cases of glass lined the walls and stood free in the middle of the floor, all containing merchandise from jewelry to electronics to even rarer items like military medals. Larger items such as appliances, luggage and furniture occupied several corners. All for sale.

Lord. She might be drooling.

*Focus, ma’am. Not here to shop for you...although is that a real Louis carry-on...?*

“I see the direction you’re staring and unless that Louis Vuitton is paying its share of the Uber ride and dinner check, it stays right where it’s at,” Tatum drawled.

“Killjoy,” Nore muttered, then huffed out a, “Fine.”

“Thank God,” her friend added, not bothering to utter it under her breath.

But when you’d been friends for as long as they’d been—freshman year of college—and had cleaned up each other’s,

uh, mess after a night of excessive partying, things like offending each other ceased to be a concern.

“So are you going to tell me why we’re here?” Tatum pressed.

“You’ll see in just a minute.” With determined strides and a pang in her chest that she refused to acknowledge, Nore headed toward the back of the store. A handsome older Black gentleman sporting a well-groomed salt-and-pepper goatee and a dark green short-sleeved shirt bearing the shop’s logo stood behind a case.

“Excuse me, hi,” she greeted him with a smile.

He returned the smile. “Hello. Can I help you?”

“Yes.” As she opened the oversize purse at her side, her lips trembled, echoing the quiver in her belly. And that damn twinge in her chest that she was still refusing to acknowledge. “I want to sell this.”

She pulled out a black cloth napkin that she might or might not have swiped from the restaurant they’d dined at the night before and laid it out on the glass counter. Unwrapping it, she revealed a gorgeous two-carat, emerald-cut diamond ring with a white gold band.

Gorgeous...and ugly because of the pain attached to it.

A soft gasp came from next to her.

“Nore,” Tatum breathed. “What are you—?”

With her gaze trained on the ring, Nore shook her head. “Getting rid of the trash.”

“Nore,” Tatum said again, but Nore cut her off with another shake of her head.

“I know what I’m doing, Tate.” And for added emphasis she nudged the napkin and the jewelry just a little farther across the glass toward the pawnshop employee. “I’d like to sell this, please.”

The older man, whose name tag declared him as Dan, arched both eyebrows.

“Pawn it or—”

“Sell it.” She reached into her bag again and emerged with an insurance appraisal. “Here’s an appraisal from six months ago.”

To Dan’s credit, he didn’t blink. But working in a pawnshop in Las Vegas, he must see a lot. The least of which was a jilted fiancée wanting to sell her engagement ring. Not that he knew about the jilted fiancée part.

Still...

He picked up the ring and studied the appraisal, flipping through the couple of pages. She knew what he’d see. A bunch of details about clarity, cut, color, measurements, yada, yada, yada. None of it mattered as much as that price in bold font: \$16,600.

“You are aware that jewelry depreciates...” Dan started, lifting his gaze from the ring and the report.

“Yes, but not by much given that ring was bought and appraised just six months ago. Not that I care.” Nore waved her hand. “Give me your best price, Dan.”

He studied the ring for several more moments, then looked at her again, a shrewd gleam in his eyes. Oh, if only he knew that was wasted on her.

“Emerald-cut, two-carat diamond. Good cut. E color and SI2 clarity.” He paused. “I can give you six thousand for it.”

“Deal.”

Dan blinked, but quickly recovered. Probably wanted to jump on the fact that she wasn’t haggling and seal the deal as soon as possible. Smart man. Smarter employee. “O—”

“Hold on just a second here,” Tatum interjected, throwing a palm up in Dan’s direction. She whipped around to face Nore. Grasping Nore’s shoulder, she lightly shook it. “Listen, I know the...breakup with James sent you in a tailspin. But you shouldn’t do anything out of emotion. How about you just take a beat and think on this for a few days. This is just...rash.”

Nore's lips twisted into a smile. By that pause, what her friend really wanted to say was crazy. This was just crazy.

And Tatum might not be wrong.

But she didn't care.

"Tate, I love you like Thanksgiving mac 'n' cheese. Not better, but y'know, in that vicinity. And I get that you're concerned for me, but this isn't a whim. I've been thinking about this since the moment my heart stopped feeling like it was trying to claw its way out of my chest. So about two weeks." She lifted a hand to the one still on her shoulder and squeezed when a soft, strangled sound came from her friend. Needing to soften the words and comfort Tatum, she gave her another smile. "No, it's okay. *I'm* okay—or at least, I will be. But I need to do this, and I didn't want to do it alone. So I waited until this trip when you would be with me. Because I need my girl beside me when I say a final goodbye to this chapter of my life."

"Nore," Tatum whispered, moisture glistening in her eyes.

Oh damn. If her friend started crying—and looking beautiful doing it, too. Who did that?—then she would create a spectacle here in this store. *That* she did not want.

She'd cried enough tears over James Whitehead, dammit.

"Nope." Nore shook her head. "Don't you do it. I spent thirty minutes on these lashes and eye makeup. I'm not about to let you ruin them." Turning back to Dan, she grinned, though yes, it was a bit waterlogged. "Sorry for this episode of *Black Gilmore Girls*. I'm ready to finish up this sale. I'll take the six thousand."

Dan glanced at Tatum, as if waiting for another objection. After a second, he returned his attention to Nore and nodded, smiling.

"Let me go get final approval," he said, gathering up the ring and the appraisal report. "While I'm gone, feel free to look over what we have here just in case you see anything you'd like to buy or trade. And..." His smile widened, flashing a dimple in his right cheek. *Okay*. That quick Dan



became a zaddy. “I’m willing to watch a rerun with Lorelei and Rory any day.”

With a wink, he strode off toward a closed door several feet behind him.

“Wow. Dan watches *Gilmore Girls*. What time do you think he gets off?” Nore asked, staring after him.

“Oh my God.” Tatum groaned, and Nore snickered. “So what are your plans for your sudden windfall? Although James would be choking on his tongue right now knowing you sold it for such a low price.”

The corner of Nore’s mouth curled even as her chest clutched at just the mention of her ex-fiancé. The man she’d spent the last three years with, planned to spend the rest of her life with... The man who’d broken up with her by fucking email.

Coward.

Dragging in a breath, she deliberately switched her thoughts away from James Whitehead and on to how she could spend her spoils on a ring that, in the end, hadn’t been a symbol of commitment and love but disappointment and heartbreak.

Clearing her throat, she perused the case containing glittering rings, necklaces, bracelets and even really beautiful cigarette cases. Still, nothing really caught—

“Oh,” she breathed. Her fingers touched the glass as if she could reach through to the piece of jewelry that had caught her eye. A flutter behind her breastbone persisted the longer she stared at the gorgeous brooch nestled between a butterfly-shaped hair comb and a diamond-crusted lapel pin. And she couldn’t stop staring. “That’s...”

“Stunning,” Tatum finished, her shoulder nudging Nore’s as she bent down to study the jewelry.

“Would you like to have a closer look?” A woman appeared behind the counter, her dark curls liberally sprinkled with gray and laugh lines fanning out from the corners of her bright brown eyes. More faint lines creased the teak skin around her mouth and forehead, but they only added to her beauty. This

appeared to be a woman who enjoyed life to the fullest. She didn't wait for Nore to reply but opened the back panel of the case and carefully removed the brooch. Setting it on the black napkin Dan had left behind, she murmured, "There you go. It's a very unique piece."

Wasn't that an understatement?

Gold and silver fashioned into tiny, fragile-looking flowers—turquoise, pink and dark red—surrounded a lovely portrait. Diamonds and seed pearls studded the flowers and vines, adding to the beauty of the antique piece. The woman, whose back and delicate profile were visible in the painted image, appeared to be Black. A wide-brimmed hat hid most of her features, but the skin of her cheek, mouth, chin and elegant neck was indeed a light brown.

Nore had never seen anything as exquisite.

"The brooch is fifteen-karat gold and silver with diamonds and natural pearls, enamel in the middle. The stone itself is rose cut. The piece is Victorian, dated between 1850 and 1859."

"Victorian?" Tatum touched a fingertip to a pearl. "I've never seen anything like it."

"What she's so delicately trying to not say is I've never seen a Black woman on a Victorian brooch."

Tatum shot Nore a look that clearly called her a mannerless guttersnipe. After so many years of friendship, Nore was fluent in everything Tatum Haas.

The employee whose name badge identified her as Nelle smiled. "Apparently, the painting on the brooch is a depiction of the wife of an English baron. She was the daughter of a Barbadian Parliament member. They met when her father traveled with the governor general to London and it was love at first sight. It's said they lived many happy years together, and he had the brooch commissioned as one of the many symbols of his love for her."

Nore glanced at Tatum, the fascination bubbling inside her chest reflected on Tatum's face as she stared at the older

woman.

“That’s a beautiful story,” Tatum said. She reached for the brooch, but at the last moment, dropped her arm to her side. “How did it end up here? Uh, no offense.” She winced.

“None taken. Here, you can hold it.” Nelle lifted it from the napkin and extended it toward Tatum. After a brief hesitation, Tatum accepted it and Nore crowded closer to her friend. Unable to help herself, Nore brushed a fingertip over the painting and the flowers surrounding it. A weird reverence expanded inside her, and underneath it, an inexplicable sense of urgency. “The customer who brought it in said she purchased it at an estate sale. There’s more.”

The dramatic pause that followed had Nore swiftly transferring her attention from the gorgeous jewelry to Nelle.

The older woman nodded toward the brooch. “It seems a legend is attached to it. Though the baron and baroness loved each other dearly, they didn’t have an easy road, as you can imagine. Even the power and wealth of his title couldn’t prevent racism and classism. Yet they prevailed and their love and marriage remained strong and true. Therefore, it’s said that whoever possesses the brooch will experience that same kind of love. He or she will meet their soulmate, and though the path will be troubled, they will ultimately find a lasting true love.”

The cynical part of Nore—the part that had ceased to believe that kind of love existed—scoffed at this “legend.” But a smaller, battered part of her yearned to believe. To hope...

Once more she glanced at Tatum, then down at the stunning, elegant solitaire on her left ring finger.

“I’ll take it.”

The words burst out of Nore before the thought had fully formed. But once they were out there, she didn’t negate them. No. She let them stand. Especially when a...rightness settled on her like a soothing balm. That peace calmed the urgency inside her like a cool, refreshing breeze on a sweltering night.

“What?” Tatum frowned at her. “You can’t just... Listen, I understand about the ring but this, Nore...” She shook her head. “You don’t even know how much it costs.”

“Too true.” She tilted her head. “How much is it, Nelle?”

“Sixty-two hundred.”

“Right.” Nore nodded. “I’ll take it. Dan just took a diamond ring back there that I’m supposed to receive six thousand for. I’ll pay the difference.”

“Nore,” Tatum hissed. “This is—”

She held up a hand to stop her. “I’m getting it.” Then softer, “I’m getting it for you. I didn’t find that kind of love but you have, with Mark. And you should have that.” She dipped her head toward the jewelry. When Tatum started shaking her head, Nore shook hers right back. “Yes, consider it my bridesmaid gift. It’ll be your something old. And something new, too, because well, it’s new for you, right?”

“Nore,” Tatum whispered, and tears moistened her eyes.

She smiled, and gently took the brooch from Tatum and offered it back to Nelle. “Could you let Dan know?”

Nelle accepted the jewelry, glancing from Nore to Tatum, her lips curved.

“Certainly. Be right back.” She turned and headed to the same door Dan had disappeared behind.

“This is crazy,” Tatum repeated, just as quietly, but emotion throbbed in her voice.

“So you’ve said.” Nore wrapped an arm around her friend’s shoulders and squeezed. “I’m not being impulsive. Okay, maybe a skosh impulsive,” she corrected when Tatum gave her another sidelong glance. Chuckling, Nore continued, “But it’s almost poetic. Trading what’s a symbol of heartbreak for one of love. It’s beautiful. And being able to give that to you is beautiful for me.” She frowned, mock-glaring. “So don’t go ruining the moment by refusing the gift.”

Tatum studied her for a long moment. Then she finally nodded.

“Okay. And thank you. I don’t think I’ve ever received a more gorgeous and thoughtful gift.”

“Except one.” Nore aimed a pointed glance down at her left hand and the ring winking on it.

“Except one.” A smile slowly bloomed on her face, and she slid an arm around Nore’s waist, squeezing. “I’ll accept the brooch on one condition.” She paused and her smile expanded into a grin. “You hold it for me until my wedding day. If that legend is really true then maybe in the six months before I get married, you’ll find your true love, too.”

Nore snorted even as pain tugged at her, twisting. And mingling with it was a terrible longing for something she no longer believed was meant for her. Especially not in the next six months. Hell, she and James had been together for three years, and he hadn’t loved her enough to commit. And she was supposed to find the kind of love that crossed cultures, defied society and racism in weeks?

Yes, well, there was also a bridge for sale in Westeros. Dragons, too.

“Sure, I’ll keep it until then.” She held up a finger, forestalling whatever romance-related nonsense would spill from Tatum’s mouth next. “And not because I believe or even want to fall in love again.” Court this humiliation, disillusionment and hurt for another go-round? No, thank you. Masochism wasn’t on her bingo card for this year. “I want to be the one who pins it on you when you start your new life with Mark.”

“Un-huh.” Tatum nodded. “We’ll see.”

“Tate, the brooch is stunning and it has a lovely story attached to it. But you can’t possibly believe it’s more than that—a story.”

A smile that could only be called mischievous curled Tatum’s lips. “Like you said, we’ll see.”

Nore stared at her friend for a long moment, then rolled her eyes, dropping her arm and nudging Tatum’s shoulder with her own.

“Whatever. Let’s get this taken care of so we can go eat and then scream over hot strippers.”

“You mean applaud at Cirque du Soleil.”

Nore arched an eyebrow and patted Tatum’s arm.

“It’s so adorable how you think that’s going to happen.”

“Oh God,” Tatum groaned.

Nore cackled, legends of true love and fated soulmates already forgotten.

## *Two*

“Nore, you’ve done a fantastic job. The club is perfect, and the VIP section is just as I imagined. And I don’t know where you found the DJ but she’s amazing. I’m beginning to believe Joaquin might actually enjoy himself tonight.” The beautiful woman in the strapless, curve-hugging black dress praised her with a wide grin.

“Thank you. I’m so glad you’re pleased with everything so far.” Nore smiled at her client, confusingly named Shorty, as she towered over Nore’s own five-foot-six frame by at least five inches.

But then again, nothing about Greer Motorcycles Co. had been expected. Apparently, the high-end motorcycle manufacturer founded by former professional motorcycle racer Joaquin Iverson enjoyed a very laid-back environment. Nore had done her homework. She’d researched the company, which had exploded onto the business and sports scene ten years ago. With the renowned motorcyclist and custom bike builder Bran Holleran at the helm, it’d become a multibillion-dollar company.

The employees she’d come in contact with while planning this surprise birthday party had an easygoing manner, and their colorful ink, piercings and leather and denim seemed more appropriate in a tattoo shop than a wildly successful corporation. Maybe that incongruity explained why she’d enjoyed working with Shorty and her staff so much. As one of the premiere event planners in Seattle, Nore could claim some of the city’s wealthiest and poshest citizens as clients. And this hadn’t been her first birthday party. But by far, Greer Motorcycles had been her most fun and unique experience. She’d almost miss them after tonight.

Nore shifted, surveying the Capitol Hill nightclub they’d reserved for this Friday night at a hefty fee. Nearly two hundred people mingled, drank and laughed at the two bars on

either side of the massive first floor or around the empty dance floor that would be packed later once the guest of honor arrived. The club's DJ—one of the nation's most popular—commandeered the LED booth, and already the guests moved to the music she played. Fifty or so more people congregated in the intimate second floor that possessed its own separate bar and staff. The company's executives and exclusive guests occupied that area. A carefully curated catering company and waitstaff wound among everyone on both levels offering hors d'oeuvres, the heavier, more filling fare ready to serve once the birthday boy arrived.

“Nore, we have a black Range Rover pulling into the back lot.” The voice of Nore's friend and right arm, Bastian Dare, crackled in her earpiece.

Speaking of...

She pressed the mic. “Great. I'll get everything ready in here.” Switching her attention to Shorty, she said, “Mr. Iverson has arrived outside. I'm going to tell the DJ to cut the music and you should head to the stage.”

“Perfect.” She made a beeline toward the booth while Nore told the DJ on the earpiece to cut the music.

In the sudden silence, the chatter swelled, then faded, as all the guests turned toward the stage, giving their attention to Shorty as she climbed the stairs and crossed to the center with a cordless microphone clutched in a hand.

“Hey, everyone. First, thank you so much for coming out tonight to celebrate Joaquin's birthday. You're commended because we all know there's a fifty-fifty chance he'll either stay or duck out the door.” Laughter rippled through the crowd. “But know he and all of us appreciate you being here to honor our fearless leader. Who, by the way, is right outside. So, you know the drill.” She pushed a hand down, miming silence. “Joaquin will be coming in through the back entrance near the left bar. Let's keep it hush-hush until he steps inside and we all yell ‘surprise.’ Then,” she shrugged, grinning, “let it begin.”

A cheer rose, quickly followed by louder shushing.



“He’s at the door,” Bastien warned in Nore’s ear, and she held up a hand, signaling Shorty.

The other woman nodded, and with urgency in her voice, said, “Okay, everyone, this is it. Quiet.”

Immediately, silence engulfed the club, and almost as one the partygoers shifted toward the back hall. A hush of anticipation hovered; it even hummed in her chest. For a moment, she forgot she worked the event and almost felt like a guest, included in the festive atmosphere. But with a shake of her head, she shed that temporary slip. No matter how kind or welcoming the clients might be, she could never forget, she was the employee, not one of them.

Hitting the side of her earpiece, she connected with her team once more, this time addressing Caroline, the VIP liaison, she instructed, “Caro, make sure as soon as the lights are back on and the surprise is out the way, a Guinness is in Mr. Iverson’s hand and he’s guided to the VIP area. Are the hors d’oeuvres set out at his table?”

“Will do and yes,” Caro said.

“Perfect.” Nore tapped the screen of the tablet she held and checked off those two items. “We’ll open the buffet down here thirty minutes sharp after Mr. Iverson arrives and have the staff serve dinner in the VIP lounges at that time. Everyone ready?”

Several voices replied in the affirmative. Satisfied, she clicked the line off.

Show time.

The LED and interior lights shut off, pitching the club in near total darkness, only the exit signs and emergency lighting providing illumination.

The creak of the door opening preceded a deep, rumbling growl that demanded, “The hell is this? I thought you said we were coming here for a drink. This place doesn’t look open.”

Even disgruntled, the low, rough timbre stroked over the bare skin of her arms, skimmed across the nape of her neck. Grazed the front of her throat. A shiver raced through her, and

that was all before the owner of that dirty-sex-in-the-middle-of-the-night voice strode into the main area.

Holy... Had she called him birthday boy?

There was absolutely nothing *boy* about Joaquin Iverson.

Of course, she'd seen a picture of Greer Motorcycles' CEO and cofounder. But good God, comparing the digital image to reality was like equating regular margarine to apple butter. One was fine, but the other was an *experience*.

The muted green of the exit light skimmed over his harsh features, and her breath jammed in her throat. Shadows slashed over one half of his face, and yet she still stared, caught, captured.

*Brutal.*

That's the word her brain pulled free like a magician tugging a rabbit out of his hat.

Brutally sharp. Brutally strong.

Brutally beautiful.

The air lodged in her throat loosened and it whistled out, a balloon with a slow leak. She couldn't decide whether to look away from him or stare until her mind was branded with his image.

She blinked. Tried to look away.

Okay, so she was going with stare.

Fierce angles and bold planes. Dark, thick eyebrows pulled together and nearly met over an arrogant slash of a nose. An obstinate jaw that spoke of an iron will. A thick beard surrounded a wide, ridiculously sinful mouth. Downright blasphemous. The silver hoop piercing the corner of his bottom lip only drew attention to its indecent fullness.

Damn.

If she wasn't careful, she would end up penning a sonnet to his mouth.

The lights crashed on and “Surprise!” erupted in the cavernous room.

She squinted against the sudden illumination but didn’t take her gaze away from him. Even if everything inside her screamed to do just that. Like gazing directly at the sun, she should shade her eyes because he emanated danger. To her equilibrium. Her respiratory system.

Her senses.

So she noticed the slight narrowing of his eyes and the minute tightening of his mouth—as she apparently seemed to be a charter member of its fan club—when no one else did. Applause and cheers bounced off the exposed brick of the club walls, and a second later, as if those emotions never passed over his features, he smiled.

And this time, she did glance away.

Not only because Joaquin Iverson’s smile should require a warning label.

But also because it was completely fake.

Something shifted in her chest, a fluttering that still felt... hollow. The sight of that forced curve of lips, it didn’t hit right. And why she cared that a man, faced with evidence of his esteem by so many people, had to fake a smile, she couldn’t explain. And honestly, didn’t want to.

This time, she made herself turn away and switch her attention to her tablet. For the next hour and a half, she focused on ensuring dinner was served on time and the rest of the party ran smoothly. Pleased, she finally took a moment to grab a bottle of water from the bartender and stood next to the VIP entrance. From this vantage point, she could view most of the club’s lower floor. Bastien covered her and Caro had recently let her know everything was fine above, but until the last person left, she wouldn’t truly be off the clock.

Which would only be another two hours, her slightly aching soles informed her...

“Excuse me.”

That voice. She knew that voice. And if she hadn't immediately recognized it, the shiver skipping its way down her spine would've notified her of its owner's identity.

Deliberately, she turned away from the partying guests and met a piercing pair of such light gray eyes they almost appeared silver. The intensity and beauty matched the voice. Hell, they matched everything about Joaquin Iverson.

He shifted an infinitesimal amount forward, but it was enough to nearly dwarf her. Because goddamn, the man was *huge*.

From across the length of the wide room, she couldn't have gauged the breadth of shoulders and chest that any Seahawks linebacker would envy. Couldn't have guessed the looming height that had her suddenly feeling tiny and delicate, a feat that had never occurred before. Couldn't have surmised the power that emanated from his thick, muscled arms and thighs that had a simple white dress shirt and dark dress pants clinging to them like shameless groupies. And at some point, he'd rolled back the sleeves, revealing corded forearms liberally covered in tattoos, and even more creeping up toward the base of his throat.

Once more, her breath did that curious and irritating phenomenon where it evaporated into nothingness. Made it damn hard to speak.

He arched an eyebrow and extended his hand toward her.

"Joaquin Iverson. And you're Lenora Daniels. Shorty says I have you to thank for my party."

As if of its own volition, her arm stretched forward and the moment his long fingers closed around hers in a strong grip, she smothered a groan that clawed to the back of her throat. Like a flue had opened in her belly, flames shot from the depths of her, barreling up her chest, down her arm and to her palm that was clasped against his.

*What the hell?*

She stared at their hands; the blast of desire was incongruous for a simple handshake. If lust lit her up like this

with just palm pressing to palm, what would it feel like if he filled her? If that big, naked body covered her as his cock slowly buried inside...

*Okay, I repeat, what. The. Hell?*

Not caring how it appeared, she quickly extricated her hand and just barely managed not to wipe it against her skirt-covered thigh. Self-preservation screamed she reclaim control of herself rather than let him touch her for one more millisecond.

And if there'd been one lesson she'd learned since the breakup with James, it'd been to listen to her instincts. After all, they'd tried to warn her that all hadn't been right with her relationship. But she'd been so focused on making it work, on ending the curse that seemed to haunt every generation of Daniels women, that she hadn't heeded the signs.

Never again would she bury her head in the sand about anything. But especially when it came to men.

"Yes, that's right," she said, forcing a smile and an even tone that mocked the chaotic confusion tumbling inside her chest. The quiet speculation that entered his bright, narrowed eyes only further snarled that confusion. "But please, call me Nore. Only my mother insists on calling me Lenora. And since she birthed me, I can't contradict her. Or at least she doesn't listen when I do."

She smiled wider as she delivered the usual joke about her name when meeting new people, but unlike most others, Joaquin didn't crack a smile. Instead, that unwavering gaze studied her. She'd never fidgeted in her life, yet she had to fight the urge now.

"It's nice to meet you." He dipped his head, and the light from directly above them glinted off the small hoop in his right eyebrow. "Pretty."

For a moment, she blinked, caught between "Say what now?" and "Tell me more about my eyes."

But then he flicked a finger toward the brooch nestled in the folds of the ruffles at her neck. Tatum's brooch. She might've

borrowed it for the night because it went perfectly with her outfit. There should still be more than enough of the love magic attached for Tatum's wedding.

"The jewelry," Joaquin clarified. "It's pretty."

"Oh." She lifted a hand to the brooch. "Thank you."

He nodded, scanning the club.

"You've done a great job here, and Shorty can't stop talking about how much she's enjoyed working with you and your staff."

Pleasure bloomed in her chest, almost pushing aside the constriction there.

"That's always wonderful to hear." She paused, then as if some unknown entity possessed her, she added, "Although, why do I get the feeling that you're enduring this party for your staff and guests? That if you had your way, you would've been out of here right after the 'surprise'?"

He studied her for another moment, then the corner of his mouth quirked.

"Am I that obvious?"

"No." *I just happened to be watching you that closely.*

Once more, one of his dark brown eyebrows rose, as if waiting for her explanation. Hell could freeze over, and she wouldn't voice the rest of her truth. Not only would it be inappropriate, but to utter those words would be unlocking a door she might not be able to close.

A door she wasn't quite certain, in this moment, she'd want to close.

"You're right." He slid his hands in the front pockets of his pants. "In my head, I'm counting down how long before I can leave without appearing rude. Or without being missed."

"Good luck with the first one. The second? Impossible." When her words reverberated back to her, she fought back a wince. And prayed the heat streaming up her neck and pouring into her cheeks wasn't visible in the shadows where they

stood. “Because you’re the guest of honor,” she hurriedly blurted out. “And so...big.”

And because she needed to be a bit more cringey, she spread her arms the length of his wide shoulders and phantom squeezed the hard muscles.

Just...*fuck*.

Joaquin didn’t smirk or laugh at her increasingly embarrassing awkwardness. No, that already piercing gaze seemed to grow sharper, a scalpel about to slice her open and reveal everything inside.

Her heart thumped against her chest, and for the first time this evening, she tasted a hint of fear on her tongue.

The last time she’d allowed someone access to her vulnerabilities, he’d betrayed her in the most callous, painful way possible. Since then, she’d learned to keep her own counsel. Keep her counsel, hell. Wrap it in chain mail and set sentries around it.

“I get that often.”

She blinked, her brain taking a moment to connect Joaquin’s words and the dry tone in which they were stated. Seconds later, a smile tugged at her lips, then curved into a grin. And relief poured through her, extinguishing the flames still burning her cheeks.

“I bet.” She chuckled, shaking her head. “I apologize, though. That was inappropriate of me to say.”

“Why?”

Nore tilted her head, frowned. “Why was it inappropriate? First and foremost, you’re my client—”

“It’s honest, Nore. Honesty outweighs what you call inappropriate.”

“No offense, Mr. Iverson,” she said, knowing she was chancing doing just that—offending him, “but you can afford to say that. I can’t.”

He dipped his chin, his gaze roaming over her face like a physical touch.

“You’re right. Again. I’m playing that back in my head and it was arrogant. And privileged,” he said with a nod.

Surprise flashed through her. Here, she’d steeled herself to be dismissed at the very least, but he’d conceded her point, admitted he’d been wrong. She flickered a glance toward his forehead. Nope, no horn. But he damn sure was the first unicorn of a man she’d encountered.

“I’ve surprised you,” he said, practically reading her mind.

“A little.” Then, “Yes,” she confessed with a soft laugh.

The corner of his mouth lifted again, drawing her gaze there almost against her will. But damn, it was such a pretty mouth.

“Good,” he said, blunt, matter-of-fact. “We all need a little of the unexpected in our lives. What’s the saying? The enemies of happiness are pain and boredom?”

“Boredom is your imagination calling to you,” she countered.

This time his lips didn’t quirk. They slowly curved, spreading until a full-fledged smile lit his carved, stern features.

Her breath jammed in her throat. Just in time she prevented herself from taking a step backward, shifting away from the *beauty* of his smile. That wasn’t *fair*. One smile had taken Joaquin Iverson from a brutally beautiful man to simply magnificent.

“I like you, Nore Daniels,” he murmured.

Another flash of heat swept through her, flushing her skin and swelling her breasts so even her silk bra and black high-necked blouse seemed to be too many layers against her fevered flesh. Her thighs squeezed together, and she locked down a whimper as a deep, yawning ache bloomed low in her belly, pulsing hot and heavy.

“I need to get back to work,” she said, voice as low as his, as soft. Almost as if she were pleading with him to let her go.



Or worse...convincing herself to stay.

What the hell was happening with her?

He didn't respond, though. Instead, he cocked his head and for several long moments settled that silver gaze on her face. *What do you see?* The question rebounded against her skull, and she hated that the voice—hers—sounded so damn... desperate.

But dammit, she couldn't lie to herself. As she met that molten stare, curiosity dug into her. Did he see a self-assured, successful, capable woman? Or did she wear her vulnerability, her bruised confidence, like he wore his tattoos? Vivid, unmistakable and visible to the naked eye.

Better question, though... Why did she care what this man, whom she'd barely met, thought about her?

*I don't*, she silently yet fiercely assured herself.

"Why do I make you nervous?" he quietly asked.

"You don't," came her immediate, reflexive reply.

He didn't tsk, but he didn't need to. The disappointment flickering in his eyes was loud and clear.

"Up until this moment, you've been honest and plainspoken with me. And I've enjoyed it more than anything else at this party," he stated, tone blunt. "I don't know why you decided to lie to me now."

He wasn't wrong; she had lied. But never had a man been so frank and direct that it edged on rude. And never would she have believed it could be so damn hot.

Even as wisps of anger curled inside her, desire quivered just under her belly button, pooling in her sex. She didn't do dominant men. After the childhood she'd endured, she avoided men who carried even a whiff of control.

Which meant she should've ducked and dodged Joaquin Iverson from the moment his whiskey-smoke voice echoed in her ear. The moment his earthy scent—redolent of expensive leather, dark chocolate and bad decisions—surrounded her.

“Maybe,” she slowly said, meeting his startling gaze, “I’m not lying so much as displaying wisdom and caution.”

Oh, fuck that. She was definitely lying. The man made her nerves sing like they were competing for *The Voice*.

“About? We’re just talking, so what is there to be cautious about?”

He didn’t move toward her but the space between them seemed to shrink, the air evaporating like steam off an Alabama sidewalk after a sudden rainstorm. How was it possible that his already large frame appeared to expand until she couldn’t see the VIP entrance behind him, the dark hallway to her left or the stairs to her right?

No, in a matter of seconds, her world contracted to include only...him.

Magic? Some sort of spell he weaved with those silver eyes and big, long-fingered hands?

Or was it just common, old-fashioned lust?

Those eyes briefly dipped to her mouth and a bolt of electricity crackled down her spine like lightning, sizzling in the base of her spine.

Old-fashioned, maybe. But common? She almost snorted. There was nothing common about being lit up like a tuning fork only from a glance. A glance that had stroked over her lips like a physical, sensual caress...or a threat.

“Honesty?” She lowered her tablet to her side, slightly turning and leaning against the doorjamb.

He nodded. “Always.”

The way he stated that, so emphatically—hell, almost passionately—she paused. There was *something* behind that. Shaking her head, she filed it away and focused on the conversation in front of her.

Inhaling a deep breath, she deliberately blew it out, then notched up her chin.

“We both know this isn’t just ‘talking.’”

For the second time that night, she battled the need to fidget. And she barely won this round. He couldn't spy the damn near wild hurtling of her heart against her rib cage. If he could, he'd know what her outward composure cost her.

Thank God for small favors.

"Then what is it, Nore?"

Would it be rude to demand he cease saying her name? It sounded...indecent, somehow. Illicit. And all too seductive. As if his tongue curling around that one syllable was a precursor to other things he could do with that beautiful, carnal mouth.

"Foreplay."

She'd braced herself for another one of those devastating smiles. Prepared herself for rejection before he stormed off. She hadn't expected that searing flash of heat in his eyes, brightening them so they appeared like liquid steel. Nor had she predicted that his finely honed features could become more stark, more harsh or that his mouth could appear more lush, more...wicked.

She hadn't expected to stare into the face of sex.

The air in her lungs abandoned her.

Maybe total honesty hadn't been the wisest play.

"Honesty?" He drove the word between them like a sword thrust.

She hesitated, but then said, "Yes."

"This isn't foreplay. You wouldn't have any doubts about the difference with me."

He shifted forward, but at the last moment he seemed to catch himself, and that big body stilled, maintaining the distance between them. Had she actually claimed that control didn't appeal to her? Screw that. The obvious power he exhibited over himself, over his reactions, had her sex pulsing. She pressed her spine harder into the doorway.

To insert more space between them or to prop herself up?

She wasn't answering that.

"I don't flirt," he continued with that same unwavering gaze. And dammit, her stomach shouldn't flutter over that admission. "Never saw the point in it. But for you, I'm making an effort. That's what this is."

"And my point still stands," she said, shocked and thankful the words didn't emerge as a trembling whisper. "You're my client, and this—" she waved a hand back and forth "—can't happen. Not only is it unprofessional but highly inappropriate—"

Without breaking their visual connection, he pulled a phone free from his pants pocket. His gaze briefly lowered to the screen to press his thumb to it but returned right back to her as he lifted the cell to his ear.

"Shorty." Pause. "I'm still here, calm down. Listen, have you paid the event planner for their services yet?" Another pause. "Good. Send it now." He stared at her, listening to his employee on the other end. "Yeah, now. Thanks." He lowered the phone and shoved it back into his front pocket. "Your final payment will be sent in fifteen minutes. And in—" he glanced down at the chunky black watch on his wrist—"one hour and forty-two minutes I will no longer be your client."

"That's not how that works," she whispered.

"It's exactly how it works," he countered just as softly. "If you want it to. Do you want it, Nore?"

*Do you want it?*

Define "it." Because wasn't that the crux of his loaded question? What, exactly, did she want? More of this banter, this flirtation that went against the grain for him? More time with him? Maybe finding somewhere to sit and talk?

Or...

*Him.*

Did she want him and everything that sinful mouth promised? Did she long to have him wield that sexy—and intimidating—control over her? Have him exert the power his

big frame and thick muscles promised? Have him unleash it all on her...inside her?

An answer shivered in her throat, tried to claw its way to her tongue.

But what that answer was, she didn't know.

Her lips parted, ready to shape around the one she *should* give, for any number of reasons.

As a Black woman owning and running a business in a highly competitive field that depended on not just being above reproach, but the *very appearance* of being above reproach, she couldn't afford mistakes. Literally. Where others might have grace, she didn't.

As if she needed another reason, she also didn't know him. More power to the people who could rock a one-night stand, but she wasn't one of them. Or at least, she hadn't been.

And she'd never crossed the line of becoming involved with a client. Just the thought of it... She could be jeopardizing everything she'd worked so hard to obtain.

Yet with every one of these very valid reasons ringing in her head, she couldn't push the only suitable answer out of her mouth.

"Stop overthinking," he ordered, and her stomach contracted at the vein of steel running through it. Lust pumped through her, shocking her with its intensity. Into this astonishment, he continued in a voice that surely was akin to the one that had seduced Eve into her fall from grace. "Give yourself permission to take."

Those words resounded in her head, in her wounded soul.

So easy for him to say. Since she'd been a kid, she couldn't just say "fuck it" and take. God knew she loved her mother, but Margo Daniels had been too busy doing just that—taking—so Nore had to be the responsible, stable one. And years later, when she had thrown caution to the wind, what did she have to show for it? A failed relationship and an unwanted business partner.

So no, “taking” didn’t come naturally to her. It fucking terrified her.

And still... Her gaze dropped to his mouth, lowered to his broad shoulders, to his wide chest. When flames ignited, licking at her, she quickly glanced away from him.

“You let me know. The decision is all yours about what happens or what doesn’t,” he said, and the hard note no longer threaded his tone, but his voice still remained low, cotton-soft and gravel-rough. “I’ll wait for you up there.” He jerked his chin toward the stairs that led to the VIP area. “If you decide no, you don’t even have to show. But if you climb those steps and walk through that door, then I’ll know it’s a yes.” He cocked his head, and his gaze roamed her face again, touching on her cheeks, nose, mouth before returning to her eyes. “No pressure, Nore. And whether you come to me or not, what’s between us stays here.”

*Come to me.*

A shiver rocked through her. The temptation contained in those three words... She shook her head. No way she could even be considering his sensual invitation. This wasn’t her.

*It could be...*

“I need to go.” She cleared her throat and nodded at him as she moved back toward the club’s main area. “It was nice meeting you, Mr. Iverson,” she murmured.

Walking back toward the bar, she tried to put his proposition out of her mind. She had a job to finish, and it required her attention. Because no matter how visceral the attraction or stunning the smile... No matter that even now her body hummed with the residual effects of just being near him and inhaling his intoxicating scent, the answer was no.

It had to be.

## Three

Joaquin Nathan Iverson enjoyed taking risks.

A person couldn't be a former professional motorcycle racer and the founder of his own company manufacturing high-end custom bikes and *not* enjoy taking risks. He'd road-raced in Texas, competed in Spain and finished first in the Superbike World Championship in Malaysia. He'd started a business with a partner and a vision and watched the first motorcycle bearing his company's name roll out on a showroom floor as if birthed.

All of them had been adrenaline rushes, thrilling and life-changing.

And yet, as he sat on a couch in a VIP section of a nightclub, gaze trained on the room's entrance, his pulse pounded in his ears and exhilaration pumped through his veins as if he were back out on a track in Leicestershire, England, vying against the best the sport had to offer.

Had he ever been this wired over a race, over a new custom design? Yes. Over a woman? No.

Not even the one who sometimes haunted his dreams.

He clenched his jaw, mentally shoving the door shut to the memories. For good measure, he slammed a padlock on it. He'd become somewhat of an expert locksmith when it came to his past. It had no place in his present. Especially when the here and now included the sexy-as-fuck event planner who could possibly walk through the door any moment.

God, let her walk through that door.

It was probably blasphemous for him to seek divine intervention in getting Nore Daniels to appear given everything he intended to do to her if she did. But he couldn't bring himself to care. Whatever got her here. Whatever worked so he could satisfy this greedy curiosity about her.

Whatever put him one step closer to satiating this relentless, driving hunger to taste that lush mouth, touch that gorgeous body, hear that husky voice break on his name...

Tension vibrated through him like a steady electric hum. Leaning forward, he propped his elbows on his thighs, clasping his hands between them.

Never had he done...this. Never had he been "this guy."

No conceit but just the truth—as ugly as it might be. Since the age of thirteen when his voice dropped and his height shot up, female attention hadn't been a hard thing to come by. But when he'd turned eighteen and begun his professional racing career, women flocking to him had taken on a life of its own. And he wasn't naive enough to think it was his face and body that were responsible—damn sure wasn't his personality. No, being an athlete, earning more money and fame than he'd possessed in his life had been the major determining factors. And when he and Bran Holleran, his partner and custom bike builder, had teamed up to open Greer Motorcycles? Yeah, he'd never lacked for companionship. And by companionship, he meant fucking.

He'd never had to chase, to pursue. Not even with Madison

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*Shit.* He scrubbed a hand down his face. Why did his ex, the one woman he'd ever loved...the woman who had betrayed him...keep infiltrating his thoughts?

*You know why,* a low voice rumbled not so much in his head, but in his chest. In that quiet, desolate place he pretended didn't exist.

Today would've been their five-year wedding anniversary.

If she hadn't died a year after they married.

Was that what tonight had been about? Could he chalk up the urgency throbbing in his veins as he talked with Nore, as he savored every detail about her stunning face and ridiculously hot body? Had it all been about the need to forget the fucked-up date he unwillingly kept track of?



An image of Nore Daniels rose in his mind like a mirage—or a warning.

Standing in that doorway, head tilted back, he'd first noticed the warm, rich brown of her wide, thickly lashed eyes. No, not brown. They were too light, too unique for that ordinary description. Tawny. Like the feathers of the owls he used to see while camping with his father years ago. For a moment, he'd lost himself in those eyes and a sense of peace, of comfort he hadn't experienced since those long ago days on the road with his dad, sleeping under the stars at night.

Chest tight with those memories, he'd lowered his gaze to the lovely mass of dark curls that framed boldly cut cheekbones so sharp they could've drawn blood. Lower still to the elegant slope of nose and slightly flared nostrils, to the delicate line of her jaw that he'd bet his own Kawasaki Ninja ZX-10R could turn stubborn in a blink, and on to her chin with its faint cleft. Just as his mind's eye did now, his too-damn-fascinated gaze had zeroed in on the illicit beauty of her mouth. Those wide, plush lips could bring a man to his knees. Literally. And gladly.

That was all before he had a close-up-and-personal view of a body sporting more curves than the most dangerous track. And like when he encountered a challenging racetrack, his body damn near vibrated with the need to ride it.

Full, high breasts pushed against a sleeveless black lace shirt with a high collar that had his fingers itching to cup and mold her flesh in his hands. A tight leather pencil skirt molded to a delicious flare of hips and legs that appeared impossibly long with her black stiletto heels. He hadn't needed to see the ass that deserved its own warning sign. *Caution: One glance may cause instant hard-on.* One glimpse and he'd discovered that fact for himself.

So yeah, maybe this damn near desperate need for the event planner had something to do with the date. But it wasn't the only reason—not even the main one. Nore Daniels, with her soulful eyes, alluring beauty and video vixen body, had that on lock.

And he wanted it. Craved it.

All of it.

Tearing his gaze from the door, he flipped his wrist and peered down at the watch that had once belonged to his father: 1:32 a.m. The party had ended nearly a half hour earlier, and he'd been waiting here since for her to arrive.

Disappointment slid through him, and the power of it should've shaken him. Maybe later it would and he'd be thankful to have dodged a bullet. But right now...

Right now it pressed down on his chest like a heavy weight. He rose and shifted from behind the table—

A movement near the VIP entrance snagged his attention, and he jerked his head in that direction, half expecting to see Shorty standing there, although he'd told her to go home when the party ended.

Lust punched him in the gut, and his abs tightened against the impact.

No. Not Shorty.

He met a pair of golden-brown eyes, and once more that calm invaded him, meshing with the desire and creating a dichotomy that shouldn't cohabit, shouldn't work. Yet it did.

“Should I be afraid security's going to show up and escort us out?” she asked in lieu of a greeting.

“Taken care of.” A conversation with the owner and a large payment on top of what it'd cost to rent the club for the evening had ensured them privacy. Sometimes being wealthy had its perks. “Do you want to be here?” he demanded, and almost winced at the gravel abrading his tone.

If his dick trying to bust past his zipper wasn't a clue to the hunger coursing through him with curled claws, then his voice would be.

“Were you getting ready to leave?” she countered, still standing in the doorway, not having taken a step into the enclosed suite.

“You first.” Because her answer outweighed his in terms of importance.

Silence greeted him, and she glanced away. It required every bit of control he’d learned over the years to remain standing in front of the couch instead of striding over to her, pinching that sweet chin and making her meet his eyes.

“Yes,” she murmured, turning back to him. “And no.” She huffed out a soft chuckle, shaking her head. “I’m here, so yes, I want to be. But should I be here? No.”

He nodded; he got that.

“Yes, I was getting ready to leave,” he said, answering her question.

Surprise flashed in her golden eyes. “You didn’t think I would—” she paused and something else flickered in her gaze—something that had his gut tightening to the point of a dull pain “—come to you,” she finished, giving him his earlier words back.

A taut silence pulsed in the enclosed space, and he couldn’t remove his gaze from her, from the cascade of emotions that marched across her face. God, he wanted to dive into that beautiful head of hers. The desire equaled the need to bury himself inside her body.

The precedent unsettled him—never had he craved unraveling a woman’s secrets as much as fucking her.

That alone should’ve warned him away with a madly waving red flag. But like a moth lured by the beautiful yet lethal flames, he drew closer. Couldn’t resist her.

“No,” he admitted. And because he’d demanded honesty from her earlier, he was compelled to give her the same. That, and he despised lies. When you grew up weaned on deceptions like milk, the taste of them became sour on the tongue. “I hoped you’d stay but didn’t assume you would. Nothing about you, Nore, is a sure thing.” Or a simple one.

Her mouth twisted into a sardonic smile. “Well, at least there’s that.”

“Meaning?”

“If I’m going to be foolish as hell, at least I went down fighting.” She sighed after delivering that enigmatic statement and thrust her hand through the thick, dark brown curls that framed her face and grazed her shoulders. His fingers and palms itched to tangle themselves in those gorgeous, tight spirals. He fisted his hands as if trapping the imagined sensation, then slowly loosened them. “At the risk of sounding really cliché, this is all new to me. I’ve never—”

“Fucked in a VIP suite in an abandoned club after your surprise birthday party?” he supplied. “Yeah, me neither.”

“Right. That, too.” A ghost of a smile flirted with her lips before she sobered, her expression solemn, intent. “I’ve also never endangered my business, its reputation and my own over a fuck in a VIP suite in an abandoned club after a *client’s* surprise birthday party.”

The weight of her words, her confession, and what she risked by being there sank into him, settled onto his chest. He understood this, too—and yet he couldn’t. The facts stood that if this night were exposed, he wouldn’t be penalized for it. He’d weather the storm with mild recriminations. In some circles, he’d even receive winks and metaphorical pats on the back. Nore, though? She would be condemned, branded with a scarlet letter, and she wouldn’t recover.

She gambled much, much more showing up here.

“If I were a better man, I’d tell you to turn around and leave. Assure you that this—” he waved a hand back and forth between them “—isn’t worth it. But I’m not that man.” She could ask anyone; he’d heard it often enough. So often, he’d stopped trying to be anything but who he was—a bastard, in personality and by birth. “So I’m going to exhibit uncharacteristic selflessness and offer you an out. Last chance, Nore. Turn around and walk out that door.”

She studied him for a moment, then softly snorted. “If you had tried to convince me that this wasn’t a bad idea, I might’ve actually left. But you not even trying...” She shook her head again. “I’m not going to analyze what that says about me.”

“Why are you risking it?” he demanded.

More than curiosity drove that question. Curiosity didn't describe an almost wild, incessant need to hear her answer. To satisfy a...longing deep inside that was old, familiar and so damn hungry.

A long, silent moment stretched into two, then two more. Finally, she lifted a shoulder in a small shrug. “Honesty?”

“Always,” he said, and hated the desperation that tinted his voice, his fucking soul.

That, too, tasted familiar.

“Because I haven't felt this wanted in a long time.” On the heels of that admission, she lifted her hands and pressed them toward him, palms out. An impatient sound escaped her as she wrinkled her nose. “No, that's not the whole truth. I haven't felt this *alive*. And God—” she loosed a small, self-deprecating and *sad* chuckle “—I need to feel alive. To feel vital. It's addictive.” Another of those heartbreaking soft laughs. “I know I'm not making much sense.”

He couldn't speak. Could barely breathe past the stranglehold her words had on his throat. The heat that had been simmering from the moment she appeared in the doorway flared, searing him, blinding him to everything but the need to touch her, taste her. Fucking consume her until nothing remained of either of them but ashes.

She thrust fingers through her hair once more. “I told you it \_\_\_”

“Close the door.”

He heard the blunt, almost cold tone of the order, but with him using every bit of his control to restrain himself—to keep himself from charging across the space and leaping on her like an apex predator—he couldn't help how the words emerged.

Her eyes widened, and even with the distance separating them, he caught her low breath. Saw it with the hitch of her chest. But after the briefest pause, she turned and obeyed, shutting the door. The soft click of the lock sliding into place echoed in the booth like a shot.

Hot, damn near feral satisfaction slid through him.

She sealed her fate with that twisting of the lock.

No, with the *I need to feel alive*. He couldn't possibly let her walk away. Not then. Not now. They were both going down in flames.

“Come here.”

She didn't hesitate this time, and another bolt of gratification hit him, sizzled in his veins. Gratification and anticipation. It must have only taken seconds for her to reach him, but the moment stretched, feeling like an eternity. And by the time she stood in front of him, he nearly shook with need. His cock throbbed, echoing the pounding of his heart.

And as soon as she stopped—her head tilted back, those tawny eyes on him, her plush lips parted—he didn't hold back. He lifted his hands and surrendered to the unceasing urge that had been scratching at him from the first time he'd seen her. Tunneling his fingers into her hair, he didn't even attempt to contain his groan. Not with the coarse silk sliding over his skin, tangling in fists.

Until this moment, he hadn't realized he'd been living an existence of sensory deprivation.

And like any man robbed of sustenance, he feasted.

Lowering his head and holding hers captive, he took her mouth. Fuck that. He laid siege to it.

*Don't be a goddamn feral beast and scare her. Gentle.*

The admonishment whispered through his head, and he tried to heed it. Dammit, he did. But as soon as those soft, full lips parted under his, granting him access to the wet, intimate depths of her, he gave up that fight. Angling his head, he thrust his tongue deep, sliding it over and around hers, demanding she meet him, play with him. Fuck him.

And God, she did.

Plunge for plunge. Lick for lick. Suck for suck. The kiss was wild, raw, messy. He didn't hold anything back, but neither did she. If he'd feared frightening her with his

intensity, his hunger, all that evaporated under her equally ravenous response. Nore not only gave as good as she got, she ordered him with a frankly erotic lick to the roof of his mouth to give her more.

Using the grip on her hair, he tilted her head farther back, and he drove harder, claiming more and offering it in return. Every slide of his tongue over hers, every greedy suck stroked and tugged on his cock. And when those even white teeth tagged the hoop at the corner of his lip and tugged... Fuck.

Almost painful ecstasy shot to his dick, and with a rumble of impatience, of pleasure, he shifted closer, grinding against the soft give of her belly. But rather than ease the clawing ache, the feel of her cradling him only ratcheted up the need until he fucking shuddered against her.

She tore her mouth from his, her breath hot, moist against his cheek, his jaw. Her hands, which had been fisted in his shirt at his back, loosened their grip and slid down his spine, settling on his waist. Her fingernails bit into his skin there, his clothing no deterrent to the muffled sting.

With a grunt, he buried his head in the crook between her neck and shoulder, relishing the bite. Dragging his teeth up the side of her neck, he nipped the rim of her ear.

“Don’t play with it, baby. Harder if you want to mark me.”

And to show her just what he meant, he drew the tender, sensitive skin behind her ear between his teeth, pulling, sucking.

Marking.

Her soft, sweet gasp punctuated the air, and he moaned against her flesh. Just as he’d bidden, her nails dug deeper, and the nip of pain flared up his spine, nailing him in the back of the neck before zipping back down to tingle in the base of his spine. With a muffled curse, he bucked against her, grinding, seeking.

Riding on a precarious edge, he sought out and located the zipper at the back of her blouse and jerked it down. In his

mind, he apologized for the rough action, but his mouth didn't voice it. The only thing he could vocalize was, "Off."

And to accentuate his order, he balled the material at her waist and tugged the top up, baring the skin of her belly. She lifted her arms, facilitating the removal of her clothing, and as he dropped it to the floor, she reached for him, sliding buttons free. But impatience crawled through him, and he gently but firmly brushed her hands aside. Shunning the buttons, he released his cuffs, yanked his hem free of his pants and pulled the shirt over his head. It joined hers at their feet, and he wasted no time tugging her against him again.

Only then did he allow himself to take her in. And it did nothing to calm the erotic squall whirling inside him. The sight of her—gorgeous, lush breasts cupped in black lace and silk—almost unraveled the tenuous grasp he had on his control. Jesus, she was... Yeah, they hadn't created a word yet to accurately describe the beauty and sensual magnetism of the woman standing in front of him.

"Unless there's something new I haven't heard of where you can stare me into orgasm, I think you should touch me now," she drawled.

She uttered the teasing remark with a smile, but did she know her voice carried the faintest note of uncertainty or that her eyes reflected her discomfort? What the hell had caused this stunning, successful, seemingly bold woman to harbor any doubt about herself? The need to hunt down whatever—or whoever—was responsible for that crime and inflict a punishing lesson rose in him so swift, he gritted his teeth against it.

"I'm having a tough time deciding where to put my hands or mouth on you first." Cocking his head, he lifted a finger to gently trace her eyebrows. "Here, so you'll close these beautiful eyes that tear a hole in me every time you look at me. Or here—" he pressed a thumb to her pouting bottom lip "—because no matter how many times I take this fuck-me mouth, it's not enough. Or here—" he brushed his fingertips over the curve of her breast, just above where the lace ended and then lower to circle the beaded nipple "—because you're so



goddamn sexy. And I've been wondering for hours how sensitive you are and what sound you'll make when I get my tongue on you."

Her harsh puffs punched the air, and he wanted those pants to break on his lips, to swallow them.

"Here." She cupped her own breast. "I want your mouth and hands here."

Without looking away from her, he grasped her free hand and lifted it to her other breast.

"Hold them there for me."

A shiver rocked through her as she acquiesced, holding her flesh up to him like an offering. On a groan, he covered her hands with his and, dipping his head, drew her into his mouth, lace and all. Her cry echoed in his ears, another sensory caress, and he rewarded that needy response with a firm pull on the diamond-hard tip.

She arched into his caresses, and with a growl, he yanked the bra cups down and curled his tongue around her nipple, licking and grazing with his teeth before lapping at any sting he caused. Her hands trembled beneath his, but she still presented herself to him, and each quake of her body, each soft whimper enflamed the heat licking at his gut, over his cock. By the time he switched breasts and treated the neglected flesh to the same ministrations, she twisted and undulated against him, a sheen of perspiration dotting her chest.

He sank to his knees, opening his lips wide over her quivering belly, and fingernails scraped over his scalp. He grunted at the pleasure/pain, and a rumble rolled out of him as she gripped his hair, tugging on the strands. Not to push him away, though. On the contrary, she crushed him to her. The demand behind it had a headiness, not unlike a hit of alcohol in his veins.

She was so damn uninhibited in her responses to him, and it was hot as fuck. Addictive. Here, with their hands on each other, his breath bathing her bare skin and her hips jerking

forward in a rhythmic, greedy dance, total honesty reigned. Lust, desire—it stripped both of them bare of any artifice.

Locating the zipper at her side, he lowered it and skimmed the leather down the rounded curve of her hips, leaving her clothed in her bra, high-cut black panties and those wickedly sharp stilettos. She was a dream come to vivid life. A wet one.

“You good?” He checked in with her, glancing up her torso to meet her eyes.

A gaze, bright with pleasure and lust, stared down at him, and he had his answer. But he needed to hear it. Needed her to verify that she was with him.

“Yes.” Her low, husky voice stroked over him, and he nuzzled her belly, sipping at the tender skin just above the band of her underwear. “Don’t you dare stop.”

He chuckled against her, then quickly divested her of the heels. Then her panties. She stiffened but he didn’t halt, instead cupping her hips, lowering her to the couch and pressing his mouth to her sex.

Fuck.

Her sharp cry rebounded off the walls, and she went even more rigid, her fingers gripping his shoulders, her thighs falling open.

“*Oh God.*” Her hips jerked upward, bucking into his lips, his tongue.

With a low hum of pleasure, he cradled her inner thighs, opening her wider for him. He licked a path between her swollen, soaked folds, flicking her clit. Her taste—musky, earthy and so goddamn delicious—filled his mouth. Immediately, she became his favorite meal, and he feasted. She writhed beneath him, and he tightened his grip, holding her down as he dived into her, sucking, lapping at her flesh. Her cries fell around him, and his purpose was to claim more.

Trailing two fingers through her lips, he gathered the wetness and stroked into her sex, burying his fingers to the base. She shuddered, grinding down on his hand, urging him with each shift and twist to fuck her. And he gladly obliged.

Though his cock pounded, jealous of that silken clench around his fingers. He didn't blame it.

Pursing his lips over the engorged button cresting her flesh, he thrust into her over and over. He couldn't get enough. Not of her taste. Not of the flutter of her clit against his tongue. Not of the tight clasp of her sex. He lost himself in her, her pleasure, his. They were so intertwined that when her feminine muscles clamped down on his fingers, milking them, and the bundle of nerves stiffened, he growled. Her cries littered around them, and he didn't let up until she weakly pushed at his head.

"Uncle," she rasped, threading her fingers through his hair. "You win."

He chuckled, and even to his ears, the sound was dark, sexual. Reflecting the lust roaring through him like the wildest storm. Scattering kisses up her belly, on each nipple, her collarbone and, finally, her mouth, he hungrily worshipped her. She tangled her tongue with his, not turned off by the flavor of herself still clinging to his lips.

"I need you inside me." She nipped at the corner of his mouth, his chin. "Please. Now."

Before she'd finished the demand wrapped in a plea, he switched places with her and had her straddling him. Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled his wallet free and removed a condom. Tossing both to the cushion beside him, he reached for his belt buckle, but Nore pushed his hands out of the way similar to what he'd done earlier with his shirt. She attacked his belt, the tab on his pants and his zipper. Within moments, she dipped her hand inside his black boxer briefs, wrapping her fingers around his cock and squeezing, stroking.

His fingers gripped her hips, and tipping his head back, he savored the pumping of his flesh by those pretty fingers. From beneath his lashes, he watched her. Watched pleasure and fascination suffuse her face. It was intoxicating. What man could resist that look on a woman's face while she stroked his dick?

That man might exist, but it wasn't him.

A tautness banded his lower back and he rocked up into her grip. A hot sizzle of electricity hit him, and he lowered a hand, covering both of hers. With his other one, he grabbed the condom, tore the package open and handed it to her. She took it with eager hands and in moments, sheathed him, and he ground his teeth against the caress that should've been perfunctory. It was anything *but* perfunctory.

“On you, Nore.” He swept a hand up her back, cupping the back of her neck. “When you’re ready.”

*Just, please God, don't let her take too long.* He hovered on a razor edge of control. But to make it good for her, he'd grasp hold to it.

Maybe.

She gripped one of his shoulders and notched him at her entrance with the other. He hissed out a breath at the kiss of her sex to the tip of his cock. Already her liquid heat seared him and he wasn't even inside her yet.

Their gazes connected and slowly, so damn slowly, she sank down over him. Her eyes went hooded, and her teeth sank into her bottom lip. When her lashes started to lower, he shook his head.

“No, baby. Keep those pretty eyes on me.” He squeezed her nape, and her lashes rose. “That's it. I want to see everything.”

“Everything” being that flare of surprise and consuming heat that darkened her golden eyes. That slight loosening of her features as pleasure claimed both of them. That soft pop as her lip pulled free of her teeth and a low whimper escaped.

Jesus, he was on fire.

He held himself as still as a statue as she branded him with her sex inch by inch. When she paused, her walls fluttering around him, he tried to think of every damn thing to clutch to the shredded remnants of his control. Third-quarter figures. Fried okra. Frolicking damn puppies.

She took another inch.

Yeah, frolicking puppies weren't going to cut it.

Shooting forward, he crushed his mouth to hers, thrusting his tongue deep.

“Get down on me, baby. Take it,” he growled against her lips.

With a sound somewhere between a whimper and a sob, she obeyed him. From one moment to the next, he was drowning in liquid fire. A low, deep groan rolled out of him and he buried his face in the base of her neck.

“Fuck,” he breathed.

They remained still, her sitting on his lap, him buried high inside her. He wrapped his arms around her back and she wound hers around his neck. He absorbed her shivering into him and gave her his in return.

“I need to move,” she whispered.

“Then do it, baby.”

She shifted, rising slow, slow, so fucking slow off his cock until only his head remained inside her. Then she retraced the path, her sex swallowing him whole. Again. Again. And again. She rode him, circling her hips, performing a sensual dance that stole his mind and captivated his body. Her every jerk, glide and grind eroded his control and he stroked his hands over her shoulders, curling them, anchoring her as he plunged over and over into her giving, too tight, utterly perfect body.

They were frantic, chaotic, a carnal storm coming together with whispered praises, damp, writhing bodies, dirty passion. It couldn't last; something this unstable that roared toward cataclysmic couldn't survive without a fiery ending. And as her flesh quivered and clasped him, he could tell it closed in on her. Sliding a hand between them, he rubbed her clit, sweeping over it...then pinched it.

Her shattered cry ricocheted off the walls and her sex clamped down on him in a bruising grip, and her slick channel milked him, dragging him toward a release that crackled and sizzled. He pistoned through that fist-tight clasp. One. Two. Three strokes.

And he lost it. Hurtled into an orgasm that seized him, damn near blinded and deafened him. As he sank into an ecstasy that robbed him of his senses and breath, he had one lone thought.

Once wasn't going to be enough.

Not by a fucking long shot.

## Four

“Excuse me? What did you say?” Nore stared at Bastian, resisting the urge to grab her friend and employee by the shoulders and shake answers out of him.

Correction.

Shake the answer out of him she wanted to hear. And that answer *wasn't* that she had a new client consultation in ten minutes with *Greer Motorcycles*.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, willing the panic rising inside her to back off. Having a fit in the offices of the Main Event wouldn't be ideal or a good look for business.

But *damn*. Greer Motorcycles.

Specifically, Joaquin Iverson. Her former client. The man who'd transformed her into an insatiable, reckless and wholly unfamiliar creature for one sizzling-hot night in a VIP suite.

No. She shook her head. No way would Joaquin show up here, in her office, for an event consultation after *that*.

*Especially since you ran out like a guilty thief in the early-morning hours.*

Why yes, she agreed with her know-it-all conscience. There was that.

She pinched her nose harder. Damn, she was screwed. And not in the way that Joaquin Iverson was so good at.

Okay, she had to stop all thoughts like that if she was going to sit across from him in ten—no, eight minutes, now.

“I said, we have a meeting with Greer Motorcycles. They'd like to hire us again for another event.” Bastian frowned. “You're going to need to explain this—” he waved a hand toward her face “—reaction to me. This is a Big-and-Carrie-finally-got-married occasion, not a What-the-fuck-Big's-dead moment. We have a huge client who liked us so much they're

return business, but you wouldn't know it by your reaction. What's going on?"

Nore loved Bastian. Next to Tatum, he was her closest friend as well as her employee. Yet she hadn't been able to bring herself to tell either one of them about her foolish decision when it came to Joaquin Iverson. Hell, she still couldn't explain it to herself.

"Nothing." She forced a smile but must've failed in the effort because Bastian winced.

"Yeah, don't do that." His eyes narrowed on her, and she wanted to hide. "And I'm a little insulted you'd try to pull this 'nothing' bull with me. Now what's really going on? Is there anything I should know about before we walk into that conference room?" His mouth curled at the corner in a small snarl. "Did the Dickless Wonder do something to you? I noticed he actually showed up in the office today. That's enough to drive anyone to drink."

The Dickless Wonder being James Whitehead, her former fiancé and current business partner. Her stomach pitched and churned, as it did every time she thought of her idiocy when it came to James. Not only had she been stupid enough to fall in love with a man who wouldn't know loyalty if it pissed on his leg, but she'd sold that same man part of the company she'd started with nothing but a dream and a loan. Because she'd allowed her heart to blind her, her business—her baby, the only thing in this world she'd ever been truly able to call *hers*—was paying the price.

"I didn't know James came in this morning," she said, gathering her tablet and laptop for the coming meeting. "Did you tell him about the consultation with Greer Motorcycles?"

"No." Bastian's snarl deepened. "Why would I? Since when has he taken an interest in anything about the Main Event other than using the title of COO—whatever that means—and the check he gets?" He snorted. "Besides, I wouldn't want to disturb his morning Frappuccino."

"That's fair." She injected a teasing note in her voice when a scream of frustration and rage clawed its way up her throat.



Swallowing it like she'd done every day well before her relationship with James ended, she headed toward the door of her office. "Let's go get ready before our clients show up." She paused, but then—*forget it*—she had to know. "Do you happen to know who from Greer we're meeting with?"

"Not sure. Shorty called and set it up so I'm certain she'll be there. I'm not even sure of the exact nature of the event. So we'll find that out together." He waved an arm and gave a slight bow. "After you."

"Manners on a Monday. What's going on? Hitting me up for a raise?"

Bastian laughed. "A raise? Look who has jokes this morning."

"I'm here all week."

Minutes later, the humor and laughter from the teasing and banter faded as Bastien exited the conference room to greet the representatives from Greer Motorcycles. Nerves swirled in, eddying inside her and threatening to tow her under.

She could do this; she was a professional. And besides, *he* might not even be here. He was the CEO. How many executives attended event-planning meetings? The tight band squeezing her chest loosened. *Of course*, what had she been thinking? Joaquin Iverson had more important items on his agenda than a party or whatever event they wanted to plan. He had staff to deal with that.

Exhaling a breath, she moved toward the door, smiling. This wouldn't be so bad after all...

A large, tall frame appeared in the doorway. And the air punched from her lungs.

*Oh God. This was going to be bad. So bad.*

She met a piercing gray gaze, and immediately images from a month ago flooded her mind.

Her, biting and sucking on that indecently full pierced mouth.

Her, fingernails digging into those wide, perspiration-dampened shoulders.

Her, holding on to him as he gripped her hips and slammed up into her.

Her, breasts pressed to the back of the couch, his lips and tongue marking her neck as he took her from behind.

A conflagration of heat bowled through her, and *good God*, she shivered. She actually shivered, and Joaquin Iverson caught it. From the narrowing of his eyes and the slight flare of those arrogant nostrils, she just *knew* he caught the telltale sign betraying her thoughts and her body's reaction to his presence.

Had she said this was going to be bad? Oh no, no. Worse.

Because in a perfectly tailored black suit and white shirt open at the neck, he was just as beautiful, as virile as he'd been that night at his birthday party. And her breasts swelled, nipples hardening, and her sex softened, grew wet in response.

Jerking her gaze away from him, she focused on the two people behind him. She curved her lips in a smile that she prayed was better than her earlier attempt with Bastien. Just to be on the safe side, she avoided looking at her friend.

"Nore, you remember Shorty and Mr. Iverson." Bastian nodded. "Let me introduce you to Bran Holleran, cofounder of Greer Motorcycles. Mr. Holleran, this is Lenora Daniels, owner of the Main Event."

"Nore, please." She moved forward, hand outstretched to the man the same height as Joaquin, and just as large. Gray threaded through his long black hair and his beard though he didn't appear to be that much older than Joaquin. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise." Bran accepted her hand with a firm grip before he released it. "And it's Bran."

"It's wonderful to see you again, Shorty and Mr. Iverson," she said, deliberately addressing Joaquin formally. It placed a distance between them—even if it was only in her own head. "Thank you for considering the Main Event again."

“You did such a great job with the birthday party,” Shorty said, beaming wide. “But as much as I’d like to take credit, hiring you was actually Joaquin’s idea.”

“Oh well, thank you, Mr. Iverson.” She met his gaze once more and congratulated herself on the steadiness of her voice. “We’re delighted to work with Greer Motorcycles again.”

“Thank you, Nore.” Joaquin nodded, and dammit, he really needed to stop looking at her like that. As if he knew her every secret or was determined to ferret them out.

“Please have a seat.” She rounded the conference table and gestured toward the seats on the other. “Can we get you anything to drink? Coffee, tea, water?”

Minutes later, with cups of freshly brewed coffee in front of everyone, Nore nodded at her future clients. “Please.” She spread her hands wide on the table, palms up. “Tell us how we can help you.”

“We’re about to debut a new model of motorcycle,” Joaquin said. His deep voice reverberated through the conference room and stroked over her skin like silk. “It’s Greer Motorcycles’ first electric motorcycle, a dual sports model. It charges from zero to 100 percent in nine hours and from a standard 110-volt wall outlet. For one charge, the bike travels 175 miles. Of course, it’ll have Bluetooth for the owner’s cell phone, music, GPS—everything a person would have in a car. And our safety features include antilock braking and slip control systems as well as a cornering-enhanced traction control system. And that’s just to name a few features. It’s custom built and we’re ready to roll it out. Since it’s our first model of its kind, we want to do something different. A kind of reveal.”

“Wow,” Bastien said, a note of awe in his voice. “That’s impressive. The latest model I read about charged in eleven hours for 150 miles.”

“Bastien is our resident motorcycle enthusiast.” Nora smiled. “And he’s a superfan, although I promised not to reveal that.”

“Good job on that one,” her friend muttered.

“No problem.” She grinned, shifting her attention from Bastien back to Joaquin, and in that instant her throat tightened around her next words. Because his gaze dropped to her mouth and it touched her like the hot brush of his calloused fingers. She barely stopped from lifting her own hand to her mouth and tracing that phantom caress. A month ago, she’d called this man dangerous. Her opinion hadn’t changed. “So,” she said, and his stare lifted to meet her eyes. Gut punch. “You’d like us to plan and organize a reveal or launch party.”

“Yes,” Bran said, drawing her attention to him. And relief sang inside her. “We haven’t done one before, parties, all that social shit—sorry.” He held up a hand in apology, and when Nore smiled and nodded, he continued. “All that *stuff* really isn’t our style. But this is our first electric motorcycle. We’ve been working on it for years, and while an electric bike isn’t new, ours is unique. A lot of hours, sweat and money have gone in to ensure that. So we need to do something different, something big, to launch it onto the market. This event, Nore, will be very important for Greer, for all of us.”

“It sounds innovative,” Bastian said, pausing from typing on his laptop. “What are the odds of us getting a preview of it?”

“Subtle, Bastian. Real subtle,” Nore muttered, and her friend flashed her a grin.

Surprisingly, Bran grinned as well.

“I think that can be arranged. After all, if you’re going to be arranging a launch party, you should be familiar with the model you’re promoting.”

“Exactly. See?” Bastian arched an eyebrow, jabbing a finger at Nore. “He gets me.”

Shaking her head, she tapped her tablet open to her notes program.

“Let’s talk about guest list size, who must be invited, if we’ll be handling that or if you will, venue...”

“I’ll cover the guest list and keep you updated on it as people RSVP,” Shorty volunteered.

“Perfect,” Nore murmured, jotting that down.

For the next hour, she and Bastian gathered enough information to get started, and after discussing a few more details and scheduling a tour of Greer Motorcycles, she prepared to bring the consultation to a close.

“I think we have all the major details down. Except for one thing. What date for the launch?”

“In three months.”

Beside her, Bastian stiffened and she blinked.

“Three. Months,” she repeated, so stunned she forgot how studiously she’d been avoiding Joaquin’s gaze.

His mouth didn’t curve into a smile, but his silver eyes momentarily brightened.

“I know it’s short notice but we just decided to go forward with this idea, and the model is going into production a month after the launch date. We’re willing to pay for the expedience and inconvenience.” Joaquin glanced at Bran, who nodded. “How does twice your usual fee work? Plus expenses, of course.”

*Holy. Shit.*

The back of her neck tingled and sweat popped on her palms. Her fee for this kind of event wasn’t nominal. Doubled? Her heart rapped out a triple-time march, the beat echoing in her head. Yes, the deadline had panic scratching at her, but they’d make it work.

They had to.

*She* had to.

Because with her portion of this fee along with her savings, she just might have enough to buy James out of the Main Event.

Freedom. This job meant total freedom and autonomy again.

Oh yes, come hell or high water, she had to make this job happen.

“We’ll make sure your launch is successful,” she said past the riotous emotion making a mockery of her self-assured tone.

“I don’t doubt it,” Joaquin murmured, and that fast the whirl of anxiety, panic and, yes, foolish hope drowned under the flood of lust that swamped her.

That voice. Those eyes. All that combined with his almost harsh beauty and Big Dick Energy had her swimming in heat, and in this moment, she didn’t want to save herself.

She needed an intervention before crawling over this conference table into his lap and demanding he give her a repeat of a month ago...

The conference door opened and James stood in the entrance, his toothy showman’s smile on full display.

“Excuse me, but Dani said we had a client, and I thought I’d—what the hell is this?” His tone changed like a flipped switch, going from ingratiating to belligerent in seconds.

Shock blasted her, and she gaped at her ex. What. The. Fuck? Was he crazy? Was he through being a lazy parasite and had moved onto saboteur? Could she kill him and get away with it?

All of those questions flew through her mind at warp speed, and by the time the astonishment thawed and red-hot anger crept in, she had settled on the answer to one of those queries.

No, she couldn’t kill him. Not only was it illegal but if she did go to jail it wouldn’t be over *him*. He wasn’t worth her chipping a nail, much less a life sentence.

But still...

“James, excuse me?” she said, trying—and failing—to keep the bite from her voice. “I’m sorry.” She shifted her attention back to the silent trio across from her, but one glance at Joaquin’s carved-from-stone face, and her heart plummeted toward her ankle boots. “Let me apologize on behalf of my—”  
*God, I hate saying it* “—partner, James Whitehead. Please—”

“He knows who the hell I am and you don’t need to apologize for me,” James snapped, shutting the door behind him with a sharp crack and stalking into the room.

Anger suffused his features, tightening his skin over patrician cheekbones and pulling his mouth into a cruel snarl that she’d never glimpsed on his handsome features before. Even his carefully styled dark brown hair seemed to stand on end.

“Watch your mouth and your tone,” Joaquin rumbled, his voice not raising.

But it didn’t need to. The quiet warning promised enough of a threat that James’s lips snapped shut, his mouth flattening and almost disappearing.

Damn. That should not have been hot; she could, and did, take care of herself. But the quickening of her breath and throb in her sex assured her that yes, his response most definitely was hot.

“Fine,” James ground out, glaring at Joaquin. “I’ll talk to you. What are you doing here?”

“Greer Motorcycles is here for a consultation,” Bastian answered, nearly chewing off the words. “If you have an objection, this isn’t the professional way to raise it.”

“Professional.” James sneered, not sparing a look at Bastian but staring at Joaquin, who met his gaze, unflinching. “I think we can forgo that as we’re family ‘n all.”

“Family?” Nore echoed, glancing back and forth between a stone-faced and silent Joaquin and a fuming James. “How... What’s going on?”

“Come on, Nore,” James said, disbelief and derision coloring his tone. “Are you trying to convince me you didn’t know the great Joaquin Iverson was my half brother?”

For the second time in minutes, shock slammed into her like a giant, freezing tidal wave. A roar filled her head just as ice skated through her veins.

Brother?

She tore her stunned gaze away from James's mocking expression and stared at Joaquin, searching... Beautiful silver eyes while James's were a warm brown. Thick, dark blond strands swept back from a bold face of sharp angles and stark planes. That wide, mobile mouth. James's short, dark brown hair emphasized his classical, refined features. Both men were tall, but even sitting in his chair, Joaquin's bulk and muscle seemed to dwarf James's slimmer build. On closer inspection, maybe they shared the same shape of their eyes and possibly the nose, but *brothers*?

"I thought your brother's name was Nathan," she said, acid bubbling in her belly, scalding a path up her chest to the back of her throat.

"It's my middle name," Joaquin explained, matter-of-fact, cold. Except for his eyes. There was nothing cold about those eyes. They burned. "Joaquin Nathan Iverson."

Nathan. Joaquin and the half brother James despised were the same person. And from what her ex had told her over the years, the feeling was mutual.

Nausea churned inside her as a sickening thought burrowed itself into her head and refused to be smoked out.

*Is that what the night in the club had been about? Did you approach me because James is my ex? Is that why you're here now?*

The questions rebounded off her skull, gaining speed and volume the longer she stared at him. He couldn't possibly hear the queries, and yet he arched an eyebrow, as if throwing his own question back at her.

Though it was illogical, betrayal clawed at her.

"Whatever you're doing here, forget—"

"James." Nore shot to her feet, interrupting his tirade. "My office. Please." She tacked on the "please" for the sake of the others in the room. Skimming over Joaquin, she nodded at Bran and Shorty. Looking at Joaquin was impossible in this moment. Because if she glimpsed the humiliating truth in his gaze... "I apologize for this...disruption. If you'll excuse me



for a moment.” Setting a hand on Bastian’s rigid shoulder, she squeezed and murmured, “If you’ll wrap up the meeting for me?”

She stalked from the conference room and didn’t wait or look behind her to see if James followed. Rage propelled her forward, and she didn’t stop until she entered her office. Whipping around, she folded her arms as James turned and closed the door, his expression mirroring the fury boiling inside her.

“How could you—” he began from between gritted teeth.

But she slammed up a hand and added a hard shake of her head.

“No, you’re done talking. I brought you in here to listen.” Lowering her arm, she recrossed it. Either that or yank his perfectly knotted Prada tie so tight it became a noose. “How dare you barge into a meeting with a client and behave so rudely? It’s unforgivable.”

He gave a derisive snort. “That’s no client. That’s my asshole bro—”

Again, her hand shot up, halting him mid-pathetic excuse.

“I don’t care how he’s related to you. This is our office, not a family reunion or barbecue. Once he crossed through that front entrance, he became a client. One who deserves respect since he’s also a *paying, return* client. You leave your personal shit at that same door.”

“Do you really believe—wait a minute.” He scowled, jabbing a finger at her. “What do you mean return client? When was the first time we did business with him and why am I just hearing about it?”

Was he serious?

*Of course he is*, she silently answered her own question. And wasn’t that the sad part of it all?

Taking a beat, she studied the man in front of her, wondering where the affectionate, charming, loving man she’d dated for three years had gone. Or had that person been the

charade the whole time and she'd been blinded to him? Not that it mattered. Her eyes were wide-open now, and she had an unfiltered view of the selfish, absorbed and lazy man she'd almost tied her life to.

God, he'd done her a favor by dumping her.

Now if she could just get him out of her company as easily as she'd kicked him out of her bed.

Inhaling a deep breath, she deliberately exhaled it then replied to him...without screaming.

"Greer Motorcycles hired us to plan their CEO's birthday party. As for how you weren't aware of it, that I can't answer as we spent months on that account. It wasn't a secret, nor was I keeping anything from you as I had no idea Joaquin Iverson was your brother."

"You sure about that?" His lip curled. "This isn't some childish way to get back at me for breaking up with you and refusing to leave the business?"

Her chin snapped back, and for a long, stunned moment she stared at him. Damn him.

"Get over yourself. If you spent more than five minutes in this office working rather than off 'taking lunch' or 'drumming up business,' then you would've known about the Greer Motorcycle event months ago. And Bastian didn't add today's consultation to the schedule until late yesterday afternoon, so I found out about it this morning along with you. So no one blindsided you in revenge or even gave a thought to you. But the point is, if you cared *at all*, the information would've been available for you to find."

"Yeah, whatever." He looked away, a muscle ticking alongside his clenched jaw.

*Yeah, whatever.*

Irritation flared inside her, and she couldn't have stopped the comparison between him and Joaquin if she'd had a traffic light and a speed bump. No matter how she tried, she couldn't imagine the blunt, nearly brooding giant being so passive-aggressive. So spoiled.

Disgust rose within her, and she couldn't decide who she blamed more for her willful, foolish blindness when it came to James—him or herself.

More specifically, her humiliating, desperate need to be loved and placed as a priority in someone's life.

“Listen, I get you don't get along with your brother—”

“Half brother,” he corrected on a snap. “And you *don't* get it. Unless you have an older half sister who treated you like shit growing up, made your mother's life miserable and did everything in his power to break up your parents' marriage. One who's a millionaire and refuses to help your family out, and then shoves his wealth in your face every chance he gets. Since you never mentioned that to me, I'm going to assume you really don't *get it*.”

Well, damn. That was a minefield she intended to avoid at all costs. It didn't concern her. Not anymore.

Although the thought of Joaquin, the man with such big hands and an even bigger body, being so careful with her even while powering into her—she couldn't envision him bullying a younger James. Rebellious, yes. Mean, abusive? No.

But hell, what did she know? If the last few months had taught her one valuable lesson, it was that people changed.

Still... Now probably wasn't a good time to tell James about her biblical knowledge of his brother. Correction. *Half* brother. Hell, James had already accused her of using Joaquin to get back at him. Of course, that was bullshit as she hadn't known Joaquin's identity when they'd desecrated that VIP couch. But who she slept with—or didn't sleep with—had ceased being James's business when he'd broken their engagement. And if he did know about her and Joaquin, he would only use that slip as ammo to reject the account.

No, she'd keep this secret to herself.

“Fine.” She nodded. “I don't understand your family dynamic.”

“You don't. Which is why we're turning down this account.” He shifted, as if preparing to leave after dropping

that announcement. As if his word was law.

“The hell we are.” She didn’t shout the objection, but her throat ached as if she had. She fought not to lose her temper all over him and this office like an emotional crime scene. “There is no reason to turn down this client who is paying double for our services.”

“I just told you—”

“I heard what you said, but like I said earlier, those issues are personal, and they have no place here.”

Besides, if history repeated itself, James wouldn’t work on the account anyway. Because he didn’t *work*.

“So my concerns don’t matter here?” He jabbed a finger toward the floor. “I’m the chief operating officer. I have a say in what happens in this company, including what clients we take on. And I say no to taking this account.”

“Yes, you’re the chief operating officer,” she said even though just stating the words scalded her tongue with bitterness. “But I’m the president, and this isn’t a democracy. If you offered up valid, professional reasons why we should turn down Greer Motorcycles, then I would listen and possibly agree. But all you’ve given me are fucked-up *Brady Bunch* reasons. And I’m not willing to walk away from the money and connections Greer will bring in. You’ll need to get over us having your half brother as a client or go with your standard operating procedure—ignore everything. Either one works for me.”

“You say this isn’t personal, Nore, but it feels that way,” he said, accusation coating his voice like condensation on a glass, cold and fairly dripping from it.

She shook her head. A while ago, his disappointment would’ve had her belly twisting with anxiety, and correcting whatever she’d done to cause that frustration and displeasure would’ve been her first priority. Making him happy would’ve superseded everything.

But those days were gone. And she had vowed never to grant another person that much power over her emotions, her

actions. Her life.

She would *not* become her mother.

“I can’t do anything about the way you feel. And I sense that short of turning down Greer Motorcycles, nothing would change it. As I said, *that* I’m not willing to do. So it seems we’ve reached a stalemate. Well, not really, since as president, I have the final say. And I say we’re taking them on as a client. That is if they still want to hire us after your thoroughly immature and unprofessional display in that conference room.”

He scoffed, flicking her complaint off as if it were an annoying fly.

“If you believe Joaquin isn’t here just to get a rise out of me, you’re deluding yourself. I mean, you’re good at what you do, but c’mon, Nore. There are dozens of event planners in the Seattle area. Dozens probably more equipped and experienced to handle a job for a multibillion-dollar company. It’s me he’s after, not your expertise.”

His shot struck her dead center in the chest. Right in the place where all her secret vulnerabilities hid from the harsh light of truth. She wasn’t naive enough not to have considered that possibility. Especially given the enmity exhibited between the two brothers in that conference room and now here, in her office.

What if this wasn’t about her being good enough to attract a client of his caliber? What if her company was just the rope in a Cain-and-Abel version of tug-of-war?

What if... What if sex with her had been about fucking his brother’s ex?

The pain that whipped at her stole her breath, and she stiffened against its lash.

Logic argued, she shouldn’t care. It’d been one crazy night that would never be repeated with a man who was as much a stranger to her today as he’d been a month ago.

But apparently, when it came to hurt feelings, logic seemed to be taking a lovely stroll out the door.

She inhaled a low, deep breath and drew her shoulders back. Damn if she'd let James see the bruises his words inflicted. She might not have been enough for him. And might not be enough for his half brother.

But she would damn sure be enough for herself.

“Maybe you don't believe I'm up to the challenge of this launch, but not only will I prove that I am, but also his guests, who are potential customers, will see it,” she said, arching an eyebrow. “So if Joaquin Iverson is using the Main Event for his own reasons, than that's fine. Because I'm using him, too. Now—” she offered James a smile that damn near gave her lips frostbite “—if you'll excuse me. I have a meeting to wrap up with our newest client.”

Not waiting for him to reply, she strode past him toward her door. When she reached it, she stood to the side, waiting for him to precede her out. Shutting the door behind her, she continued on to the conference room.

She'd made a decision regarding her company—her stability, her future—once based on emotion. And what a clusterfuck that had turned out to be. She wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

Forget that waiting-on-a-man-to-save-her shit. For years, she'd believed in the fairy tale and that she'd had it.

Now she would be the heroine and save her damn self.

The end.

## Five

Joaquin waited five seconds until the back door of the Cadillac Escalade closed after him, shutting out the cold October wind. Shorty and Bran climbed in the other passenger seats before he loosed the question that had been running laps in his mind for the last forty-five minutes.

“How in the hell did we not know that James-fucking-Whitehead worked at this place?” he asked, locking down his temper with metaphorical tape and glue sticks.

Never had he been the kind of CEO who raised his voice at his employees. Respect. His number one rule. And he wouldn't violate that now. Even though rage rolled through him like thunder. Rage and the cloying, overwhelming and too-damn-familiar powerlessness that he associated with his family.

With a barely restrained growl, he shrugged out of his suit jacket and popped the top button on his shirt. When that didn't provide adequate air flow, he jabbed at one of the black buttons on the car door, and when the window slid down, he tipped his head back. He didn't give a fuck how desperate or out of control he appeared to the others. Anything to alleviate the sudden sense of suffocation, of slowly strangling.

“I'm so sorry, Joaquin. This is my fault,” Shorty apologized, and the guilt thickening her voice settled him more than the breeze coming through the lowered glass.

Dammit, he was a thirty-five-year-old man who'd proved himself in a challenging, dangerous sport he loved and he was also a successful businessman. He was not that six-year-old boy who'd once stood, like someone pressing grubby fingers against a glass, gazing at the family his mother had created. A family where he hadn't even been the spare so much as the unwanted—no, *resented*—baggage.

That boy no longer existed.

And he refused to punish Shorty because he'd experienced a momentary regression into his dysfunctional past.

"Stop it. This isn't your fault," he said, rolling the window up and forcing himself to lean back against the seat.

"Of course it is," she insisted. "I should've done my due diligence..."

Splaying his fingers wide on his thighs, he shot her a look, and his senior vice president sighed.

"We've worked together for ten years, Shorty. You wouldn't have chosen a company that you hadn't researched to hell and back. Not to handle a party for me, and definitely not to spearhead the launch of our new motorcycle. There has to be an explanation about how my—" He pressed his lips together, his throat tightening around the word *brother*.

"—about how James came to work for this company."

It was an explanation he might've known if he'd spoken to his mother or brother in the last three and a half years.

"Do you want to call off this launch with them? It's not too late, and under the circumstances—and given your brother's display back there—I doubt it would be much of a shock," Bran said from the front seat. "No offense, man, but your brother's a prick."

"Agreed," Shorty muttered. "I like Nore and Bastian. I have zero complaints and only praises about how they organized your surprise party. But knowing your brother works with them, and witnessing his behavior today, even I have to question their professionalism and decision-making."

For several moments, Joaquin didn't reply. He returned his attention to the window, although he didn't really see the parade of office buildings, local boutiques and array of multicultural restaurants in the vibrant neighborhood.

Instead, he pictured Nore.

For a month, he'd convinced himself to keep away from her after that one sex-soaked night in the VIP lounge. And he'd been successful until the opportunity with this launch dropped



into his lap. Entering that conference room this morning, excitement had replaced the blood in his veins. Every breath, heartbeat, neuron focused like a laser on his first glimpse of her.

And damn...

His skin had drawn tight over his bones. Just one look at those gorgeous, lush curves accentuated to perfection in a pin-striped vest and pants with a sheer white long-sleeved shirt, and his cock had woken like goddamn Rip van Winkle. If his body's sudden quickening hadn't been alarming enough, the vise grip on his chest as he met her tawny gaze in that lovely face surrounded by thick dark brown curls would've been a blaring red warning.

It would've been bad form to sweep that long table clean, lay her on it and bring her to a screaming orgasm. Already, the remembered flavor of her sex filled his mouth, his nose. Sitting across from her as if he didn't know the tight clasp of her body, the scent they created together, had been the sweetest torture.

But when James had burst into the room, it'd just been fucking torture.

Because the outrage and betrayal on his younger brother's face as he'd looked at Nore... Anger, he could understand. Hell, it'd coursed through him so hot and consuming he'd needed to grip the chair to keep himself from getting up in James's smug face. In an instant, he'd remembered why it'd been nearly four years since he'd last been with his family. The toxicity had bubbled within him like acid, and he'd nearly choked on it.

So yeah, he identified with the anger.

But the betrayal? He identified with that, too. Intimately. Had glimpsed it on his own face before when it came to James.

And yeah, they might have been in that conference room on business, but that expression—God, he couldn't get past it—it had been personal.

Bitterness—toward James and, maybe undeservedly, toward Nore—twisted in his gut along with the dregs of an old resentment. And he battled the urge to lower the window once more.

“Joaquin?” Shorty called his name, and from the lilt in her tone, it must not have been the first time.

“We’re staying with the Main Event for the launch. For now, we’ll trust Nore to keep James in line. At the first sign that he’s slipped the reins, we’ll pull the event.”

“Sounds good,” Bran said, and Shorty nodded, but her frown didn’t clear.

“It’ll be fine, Shorty,” Joaquin murmured. “Trust me.”

Hours later, those two words echoed in his head when the line from his executive assistant buzzed.

Picking up the phone, he didn’t remove his gaze off his computer monitor and the latest report on the KING One, their new electric roadster, detailing its lightweight cast-aluminum frame. Bran’s design didn’t just enhance agility but gave the rider control whether they rode on urban streets or the open road.

Pride swelled inside him, fierce and hot. Even though the many Sunday school lessons his mother had forced him to sit through assured him pride heralded a big fall, he embraced it. Joaquin had named the bike after his father, and yeah, the OG that he’d been, King Iverson probably would’ve turned up his nose at an electric bike, preferring his Harley-Davidson over every model ever created. But King would’ve still been so damn proud of Joaquin, and he would’ve bragged about his son to anyone who listened.

Joaquin should know.

He’d met his biological father when he was eighteen, and then Joaquin only had King in his life for four short years before he died in a motorcycle accident. And yet, King had been that father.

As he’d done many times over the years, he glanced at the one framed photo on his desk. Raising the receiver to his ear,

he swept a gaze over the image of him and his father, standing, arms crossed, in front of his father's Harley-Davidson Heritage Classic.

*This one's for you, Dad.*

"Yes," he said, his voice gravel-rough with memories from the too-short time he'd had with King Iverson.

"Joaquin, a Ms. Nore Daniels is here to see you. She doesn't have an appointment," Magda informed him, tone cool with disapproval.

His executive assistant had two rules: her phone didn't ring more than three times before being answered and no one gained access to him without an appointment. Usually, he abided by her "no appointment rule" but not with that name echoing in his office like a dirty promise.

Or an ominous warning.

Both were reasons to instruct Magda to turn Nore away, and to schedule a time like she did with every other client. But as his hand tightened around the receiver, the hard plastic imprinting against his palm, he knew he wouldn't.

"Send her in. And hold my calls for the next thirty minutes," he said, already standing.

"Yes, sir."

Molten anticipation flowed through him as he shoved his chair back and stalked across the room. When the door opened and Nore stepped in, he waited in the middle of the room, enjoying his front-row seat to Nore Daniels walking into his inner sanctum.

And goddamn, what a show.

She hadn't changed clothes from earlier, and the perfectly tailored, sexy suit emphasized her sensual, confident glide. As inappropriate as it was, he couldn't stop himself from superimposing another, more carnal image over her. Of that form-fitting vest and sheer, billowy-sleeved shirt stripped from her body. Those wide-legged pants that clung to her hips and

legs were gone, leaving her bare in front of him, clothed only in the beautiful brown skin she'd been born in.

An itch tingled in his fingertips, tickling with the need to stroke that skin, to follow each curve. His fantasies tormented him with the need, had branded her on his mind so he couldn't forget if he wanted to. And fuck him, but he didn't want to.

Pure self-preservation had him taking a step back...almost. He stopped himself at the last second. Retreat. He'd never retreated from anything in his life—not his mother's hate, not his stepfather's indifference, not his brother's callous little cruelties. Not broken bones in his career and not starting a company at twenty-five when no one believed it had a chance in hell of succeeding.

So no, he didn't do retreating.

But right now, he damn well considered it. Because even though he towered over this woman and outweighed her in muscle mass, if she pressed one of those slender fingers to his chest, she could fell him like a tree.

Only one woman had ever possessed that power over him.

And the reminder of that woman—of how he'd lost her—had ice and steel solidifying in his body.

In appearance, Nore didn't resemble Madison Berry. But the circumstances... They were shaping up to be entirely too familiar. Like a rerun he wanted to turn off.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Nore," he said, crossing his arms. "Did we forget to cover something at the consultation this morning?"

She shook her head. "No, we have everything we need to get started on your launch event. And I apologize for just dropping by here unannounced and without an appointment."

"No worries." He waved an arm toward the sitting area in his office. "Seat?"

"Thank you." She briefly hesitated, then walked over to the black leather sofa and lowered to the corner of it.

He followed her and claimed the matching chair across from her, leaning against the back of the seat and loosely curling his fingers around the arms. Even with the small distance separating them, her earthy, sensual scent teased him. It reminded him of freshly cut wood and rain-soaked wind. Another thing that had haunted him about her. Her unique fragrance that had clung to her damp skin, her wet, tight, perfect sex.

He raised his hand and rubbed a thumb over his bottom lip, inhaling deeply as if he could still taste her. Nore shifted in her seat, and he glanced up, catching her gaze on his mouth. Desire rolled through him, and he inhaled a low, deep breath, forcing his body to relax, muscle by muscle.

“I’m listening,” he said.

She cleared her throat. “Thank you for seeing me. I wanted to speak with you about what happened at my office with James. And apol—”

“No.” He thrust out his hand. “If you’re about to apologize for James’s behavior, then you can stop right there. The only person who needs to be accountable for his actions is him.”

He’d had too many years of people justifying his brother’s conduct, excusing it, covering for him. Damned if he’d sit here and listen to her do the same.

Nore inhaled a breath and briefly looked away from him. “That’s fair,” she murmured, returning her gaze to him. “Then I need to apologize for myself. I didn’t mean to place you in that position. I didn’t know you were James’s half brother when we...”

“Fucked?” he supplied with an arched eyebrow.

Crude, yes. But she was regretting him to his damn face so he could be forgiven.

“Met,” she said, a faint tightening of her mouth the only sign of irritation. “James has talked about his brother Nathan over the years, not Joaquin, so I had no idea you two were related. Believe me, if I had, I would’ve...”

She trailed off with a shake of her head and he allowed a grim smile to curve his lips.

“Right. I get it, Nore. You wouldn’t have gotten in bed—or on the couch—with the enemy.”

Again, she shook her head, harder. “No, that’s not what I meant. I’m aware of the strained relationship between you and James. This—” she waved a hand back and forth between them “—would’ve only inflamed the situation, and I wouldn’t want that for you or James.”

“There is no *strained relationship* between me and him, because there’s no relationship.” Unless actively avoiding each other counted. And those seeds of dislike had been sown long before Nore. Long before Madison. “If James has confided in you enough to share who I am, then I have to assume he hasn’t held back on why God and Satan get along better than we do.”

She hesitated, then admitted, “James has told me some things about why you don’t get along. But I don’t feel it’s appropriate to share what he expressed to me.”

“And I’m not asking you to, although given I’ve known James much longer than you, I can guess what tales he’s spinning.” With a rude snort, he launched himself from his chair and stalked across the room, an agitated restlessness prowling through him. He needed to *move*. To burn off the sense of powerlessness that was an inevitable by-product of anything having to do with his “family.” And he used that term so loosely, he could drive a fleet of semis through it. “My point is you couldn’t deteriorate a relationship that doesn’t exist. But that brings me to something else that’s been on my mind since leaving your office.”

He halted in front of the built-in bar and yanked the stopper of the decanter. Grabbing a thick crystal tumbler, he splashed a healthy amount of scotch into his glass. Belatedly, he glanced over his shoulder and back at Nore.

“Can I get you something?” Turning, he lifted his drink and took a sip, savoring the smooth burn of the alcohol over his tongue and the bloom of it hitting his chest and stomach. “Scotch, wine? Water?”

“No, thank you,” she said. Rising to her feet, she traced his path across the room, arms crossed. “There’s another reason I needed to speak with you.”

He could’ve made her say it. But a part of him didn’t want to hear her relegate him to her closet of dirty secrets. He’d been there before—lived there for most of his childhood.

“Don’t worry, Nore.” He took another sip, studied her over the rim of the glass. “I am an expert at keeping secrets.” *At being one.* “James—or anyone else—won’t hear about that night from me. It was a mistake, and it’s forgotten.”

Damn. When he decided to lie, he didn’t fuck around. He went all out.

She blinked, and though she’d already been stationary, her body went even more still. Her long lashes lowered, momentarily concealing her tawny eyes, and the full, sensuous curve of her mouth flattened.

“I’m glad we’re in agreement,” she said, voice even. “About keeping our former...interaction between us as well as it being a mistake.”

That shouldn’t hurt. Especially since he’d thrown the first jab. Especially since he stood here trying to convince himself he didn’t give a fuck if she regretted him. Her shame over being with him had already been established.

“Satisfy my curiosity.” He lifted the scotch to his mouth but when the rim touched his bottom lip, he lowered it. “Is this request more for professional reasons...or personal? I’m just wondering who’s asking. The company president or James’s lover?”

Her eyes narrowed, and his gut tightened in response. Anticipation crept through him, its sting hot, its bite hard. And he relished it like teeth sinking into his skin. He didn’t even have to close his eyes or try hard to remember her teeth marking his shoulder on that couch in the VIP room.

He could even rub the exact spot.

“Does it matter?”

“Humor me.”

“The woman asking is the one who built her own company from the ground up, worked damn hard to ensure her business’s success and will do anything to protect it.” Something flashed in her eyes, and he would give up his Harley-Davidson Fat Boy to decipher that quicksilver flicker of emotion. “And James isn’t my lover. He isn’t my anything anymore, except a business partner.”

“Anymore.” The word tasted acrid and foul on his tongue.

“Anymore,” she repeated, her chin hiking up. “Not that I need to explain my romantic or sexual history with you. The time for that conversation would’ve been a month ago. And you didn’t seem too concerned with it then.”

He tightened his grip on the glass until the ridges bit into palm and fingers. “I deserve an explanation if you were with my half brother at the time. Were you, Nore? Were you still with him when you were fucking me?”

“No,” she snapped. “We’d broken up several months earlier.”

Knocking the rest of the alcohol back, he set the tumbler on the bar, taking those few seconds to smother the anger, the bitterness attempting to drag him back to a past he’d vowed never to revisit. Sliding his hands into his pockets, hiding his clenched fists from her—from himself. As if he could pretend this conversation didn’t eat him alive.

As if her answers didn’t sit on his chest like Sisyphus’s stone.

“So revenge or rebound?” He nodded, cocking his head. “Which was it? Using me to get over the ex? Or did you know who I was the entire time and decided to get payback by screwing the one man your ex hates?”

“Neither.” She shook her head. “Contrary to the charming adage, I don’t need to get over one man by getting under another—or on top of him, as the case may be.”

Lust shot through him. Her reminder flipped the switch on his memories and images of just how well she did on top of



him flickered across his mind like an erotic reel. He ground his teeth against the sizzle racing down his spine, lassoing his lower back and wrapping around his cock.

“And I’ll reiterate,” she continued, “I had no idea you were James’s brother. We did our research on Greer Motorcycles for your birthday party, and nothing in your bio on the site or in your media kits or press releases mentioned a family. Also, like I said in my office, I didn’t make the connection because James, your mother and stepfather only referred to you as Nathan. And there weren’t any pi—” She abruptly broke off, her lips snapping shut around the rest of her sentence.

But he didn’t need her to complete the explanation. And if he hadn’t guessed, the pity flashing in her eyes before she lowered her lashes would’ve tipped him off.

He could’ve told her to save that pity. Save it for the ostracized boy he’d once been who’d cared, who’d been hurt by his family’s emotional neglect. The man he’d become didn’t give a fuck.

The acid roiling in his gut belied that thought but another thing he’d learned to master over the years? Ignoring shit.

“Pictures,” he finished for her. “There weren’t any pictures of me in their house. Don’t worry. The truth doesn’t hurt my feelings. We’re long past that.”

Nore sighed, and her eyes briefly closed, lips firming. Moments later, when she looked at him again, the irritation that had darkened her golden-brown gaze had dissipated.

“This isn’t going to work, is it?” she murmured. Shaking her head, she raised her hands, palms up. “I had to overrule James on turning down your account because of his personal reasons. But it isn’t just James I’m fighting on this.”

“I’m not letting you walk away from this event. We have a signed contract.” His anger flared like air blown on fresh coals. “You’ll have to break it. I won’t. But I warn you, Nore, if you do, I will ensure your company’s reputation won’t survive it.”

“You’re threatening my business?” she asked, disbelief and outrage not only tightening her features but threading through her voice.

“Yes,” he said, bluntly and with zero apology. “I have three months for this launch of our new bike. It will be a game changer for Greer Motorcycles.” And it was the most important design of his career. He didn’t just possess a professional and financial investment in its success, but a personal one. His father’s name was attached to it. This motorcycle was *his*. “I won’t allow any aspect of it to be derailed or compromised. Including how it’s introduced to the public and our investors.”

A muscle ticked along her jaw, and he studied that small telltale sign of her frustration as she glanced away from him. Her gaze remained somewhere left of his shoulder as she continued to argue with him.

“You don’t need to threaten me to do my job,” she said. “But I can’t when I’m not certain if my client is sabotaging all my work.” Finally, she returned her gaze to him, and it resembled tawny chips of ice. “Whether it’s intentional or not.”

Intentional? What the fuck did that mean?

“Do I insist on being kept in the loop on the decisions regarding the event? Most definitely. But will I hinder you in any way? No. I’ve just explained what this launch means for the company. As long as you promise to do your job to the best of your ability, you’ll have my input but not my interference.”

She studied him for long seconds that threatened to stretch to minutes.

“I sincerely hope you mean that,” she said. “And, Joaquin?”

“Yes.”

“If you ever threaten my business again, I’ll quit. Your launch be damned.”

Slowly, he smiled.

Anticipation and a hot thrill, not unlike that excitement and pleasure at the start of a race, poured through him.

He didn't trust her. He didn't trust anyone who had even the faintest connection to his half brother. Did he believe her about not knowing who he was that night at the party? Maybe. Her actions pointed toward her telling the truth, but he'd been fooled before. Had his heart torn apart by someone who'd seen his brother as the more advantageous option. Painful lessons from the past hadn't just taught him to question everything—it'd tattooed the lesson on his mind. His soul.

So no, he didn't blindly accept her word about not using him as payback. And he wasn't betting his company on the words falling from her sexy-as-sin mouth.

But fuck if he didn't anticipate finding out over the next three months.

“Understood.”

## Six

“So let me get this straight,” Tatum said, resettling herself on her couch with a bowl of popcorn tucked between her crossed legs. She lifted a handful and popped it into her mouth. Just a precious few glimpsed this side of her friend. Most were only allowed to see the beautiful and perfectly poised daughter of a media mogul. “A month ago you had a one-night stand in the VIP area of a nightclub, and you’re just telling me now?” Tatum glared at Nore from the screen of the laptop set on the coffee table across from her. “Don’t quote me but I’m pretty sure that violates a girlfriend code.”

“Sorry I didn’t make you aware of my sexual exploits, Tate,” Nore drawled, shaking her own big bowl of popcorn so the kernels settled at the bottom. “I was too busy contemplating my life choices. Not only that I had given away a portion of my hard-earned company to my asshole, lazy ex, but I’d fucked his brother on a surprisingly sturdy leather couch.”

On the screen, Tatum promptly started coughing. Thumping a fist to her chest, she reached for her glass of wine with the other hand. After taking a quick sip, and another...and then another, Tate set her drink back down.

“Excuse me?” she gasped, leaning forward, watery eyes wide as she gaped at Nore. “You did what with who on a sturdy couch?”

Groaning, Nore leaned her head back against the couch and stared up at her living room ceiling. She closed her eyes, but immediately images of Joaquin Iverson bombarded her. A montage of his masculine beauty twisted in lust, of it cold with anger, of it hardened with mistrust and something else. Something altogether too close to...pain.

She lifted her head, shaking it. Joaquin’s pain, or lack of it, wasn’t her business. Not that she could possibly tell the difference. Her vagina might know him well but *she* didn’t.

Definitely not enough to decipher what moods and emotions swept through him or how they appeared on his face and body.

Yeah, best not to think of his body at *all*. In any way.

And by “best” she meant safer.

“*Lenora Renae Daniels*,” Tatum nearly roared. “Answer me. What the hell did you do?”

“Oh no. Not the government name.” Heaving a sigh, Nore pinched the bridge of her nose. “I was just getting to the other part of my news. Yesterday, I had a new client consultation with, it turned out, my one-night stand. Who—oh damn, I still can’t believe I’m getting ready to utter these words—it seems is James’s half brother. The one whose name he’s barely able to say without exhaling molar dust from grinding his teeth together. That one. The same brother who gifted me with multiple orgasms that had me glimpsing the other side of wormholes.”

Tatum stared at her, lips parted, popcorn forgotten.

“Multiple orgasms? Wormholes?” Tatum rasped. Then louder, “*Wormholes?*”

“Yes.” Nore groaned again. “And let me assure you, it is a mysterious, wondrous place.”

“I hate you.” Tatum nodded. “I love you, sis, but I totally hate you.”

“Uh, you know that doesn’t make sense, right?”

Tatum tossed several pieces of popcorn at her screen. “You’re the one not making any sense. Explain, please. How in the world did you end up having...so much in common with James and this...”

“Joaquin.” Nore dug a hand in her bowl, gathering up the snack and stuffing it in her mouth. “And I’m still trying to figure out how this became my life,” she said around the puffed corn. “I had no idea I would even see Joaquin again, much less discover he’s James’s brother. It was horrifying, to say the least. And James didn’t help by making a complete ass of himself in front of Joaquin and his people.”

“God. James,” Tatum’s lip curled in disgust, and she lifted her glass. “Good thing I’m drinking because he drives me to it.”

“Oh he was in rare form, Tate.” Anger sparked, and she crunched harder on her snack. “First, he embarrassed the hell out of me and Bastien, and then he had the balls to order me to turn down the account. Because of his petty feud I’m supposed to turn away business. I mean, it’s not like he’s going to be around to do any of the actual *work*.”

Tatum shook her head, pouring more wine into her glass.

“You’d think he’d be thankful for every customer since it puts unearned money in his pockets. Even his brother’s.”

“Half brother’s,” she corrected with a snort. “They both made sure to correct me on that point. And I agree with you, which is why there’s no way in hell I was letting the account go. If I can put up with...discomfort, then James can, too. Besides, he’ll get paid, and so will I. Because Joaquin is offering double my fee. With that, along with my savings, I can buy James out of the Main Event. I’ll finally be free of him,” she whispered.

“Oh, Nore.” Even through the screen and the thousands of miles that separated Seattle and Boston, Nore could easily spy the sympathy and love that shone in Tatum’s dark eyes. “You loved him. You trusted him. He was going to be your husband, so why wouldn’t you have believed he’d be a wonderful partner in life and business? You really have to stop beating yourself up over this and let it go.”

“I’ve been trying.” Nore reached for her own glass of wine but didn’t sip from it. Instead, she stared down into the ruby depths. “But every time he strolls back into the office from a four-hour lunch, or I hear him brag about being the COO of my company...or I have to look at Bastien with guilt eating me alive because I can’t promote him due to the overhead deadweight...” Nore couldn’t quite look at Tatum, not when that shame would undoubtedly suffuse her features. “I have no one else to blame. This is all on me.”

“You made a mistake. Girl, look at me. Getting on a cross-country flight right now isn’t ideal, but I’ll make a special trip to kick your ass,” Tatum growled. “Last time I checked there was only one perfect person, and you might be able to perform miracles with a seating chart but not with wine and water. Give. Yourself. A. Break. Bastien doesn’t blame you. No one at the Main Event does. They love you. If they didn’t, they would’ve left a long time ago. How do I know this? Two words—James Whitehead. Ain’t enough pay or benefits in the world to put up with him. Oh, they love and respect you.”

“You said ‘ain’t,’” Nore said, and yes, her voice might be a wee bit thick with tears.

Tatum arched an eyebrow, her shoulders drawing back, and from one moment to the next she transformed into the haughty society princess.

“Darling, the circumstances called for it.” A second later, the princess disappeared and her college friend returned. “I understand it’s not that easy to accept. But that’s why I’m your best friend. I’ll be right here to keep repeating all of this until you believe me.”

Nore blinked back the sting of tears and covered it by drinking her merlot. Some of the other areas of her life might be shitty, but not the people who loved her.

“Enough about me,” she said, clearing her throat. “There are only two months until the wedding. Tell me everything that’s happening and if your mother is driving you crazy.”

“Well the answer to the latter is God, yes.” Tatum groaned, the sound ending on a chuckle. “Did I tell you what she did with the caterer?”

For the next half hour they discussed the wedding plans and Tatum’s mother’s antics. By the time she wrapped up her tale of her mom almost coming to blows with the florist, Nore was almost on the floor in laughter.

“I lie to you not, Nore,” Tatum said, gasping for breath. “Mom held that lily of the valley over her head like a claymore about to strike my florist down. I just knew she was

going to have Mom arrested.” Shoulders shaking, Tatum wiped a tear from under her eye. “I swear, the only thing she hasn’t had an issue with is the dress. Yet.”

“How could she? It’s gorgeous,” Nore protested. But this *was* Regina Haas. She could find issue with orphans and puppies. Tipping her head back, she groaned. “Oh shit. She’s probably not going to want you to wear the brooch. ‘Dear, it ruins the lines of the dress,’” Nore mimicked Tatum’s mom, and the imitation of Regina’s proper tone hit the mark, if she said so herself.

“I shouldn’t laugh at that,” Tatum said. Then did just that. “But that’s one battle Mom won’t win. You bought that gorgeous piece for me, and I’m wearing it. It’s so—” She broke off, her lips pursing as she squinted at Nore.

“What?” Nore squelched the urge to pat her face. Even through the computer screen, the intensity of her friend’s stare skimmed over her. “What’s wrong?”

“You have the brooch.”

“Uh, yeah.” Nore tilted her head. “Exactly how much of that wine have you drunk?”

“And according to the legend, whoever possesses it will meet their soulmate. And they’ll have a troubled path but they’ll find true love.”

“I remember,” Nore said, twisting the cap off a bottle of water. She had a meeting in the morning, and it wouldn’t do to show up with a hangover. “So what?”

“Sooo...” Tatum paused, peering at Nore, and when she shrugged, her friend threw up her hands, huffing out a loud breath. “So have you considered that maybe the brooch’s magic or—” she twirled her hand “—or whatever is working on your behalf? Maybe Joaquin, the VIP section and now him being your client isn’t a coincidence—”

“Whoa, whoa, pump the fated mates brakes.” She barked out a sharp crack of laughter, pushing out her hands toward the screen. “That’s...a lot. And I bought that brooch for you, not me.”



“So you’re saying there’s only magic enough for one person? I don’t think it works that way.”

“Maybe not, but that ship has sailed for me. And I’m okay with it. So let’s just focus on your fairy-tale ending and let me...assist.”

This whole thing with James had only nailed home what she’d suspected—the Daniels women didn’t do long-term relationships. Damn sure didn’t do toxic-free ones. How many times had Nore scraped her mother off the floor after another of her boyfriends dumped her, then walked out the door? It’d been a pattern—euphoria, belittling, cheating, abuse, then abandonment.

James hadn’t hit Nore, but in hindsight, some of the other characteristics had been there. Including the cheating. Or at least she suspected. And he hadn’t been the first guy in her past to mistreat her. Unlike her mother, who even today hovered on the verge of another breakup with an asshole and Nore prepared herself for cleanup duty. She was getting off this fucked-up roller coaster.

“Fine,” Tate murmured.

“Tate...”

“What?” Tatum shrugged. “I said, fine.”

Nore glared at her friend’s too-innocent expression and way-too-agreeable tone.

“I’ve known you for eleven years and I know you’re just humoring me.” When she received another shrug in response, Nore slapped a palm to her forehead. “Tate!”

“I’m leaving it alone, I promise.” Setting down her glass on the table, she stretched. “I have to get ready for bed. Meeting with Dad in the morning.” Irritation flickered across her face. “I need all the rest possible for that.”

“Same. But we’re scheduled for a tour at Greer Motorcycles tomorrow.” And that was not a tingle of excitement that crackled through her like a live wire.

Nope. Totally wasn’t.

A smile curved Tatum's mouth and it spread into a full-fledged grin.

Wary, Nore squinted at her friend.

"What're you thinking?"

"Nothing, just..." Tatum cackled. "You know what this makes you, right?"

"Oh damn." Nore closed her eyes. "What, Tatum? What does this make me?"

"You, Nore Daniels, are a brotherfucker." Tatum snickered.

"Why am I friends with you?" she snapped.

Then her laughter joined Tatum's, and it felt good.

## Seven

“How many motorcycles do you mass-produce each year?” Bastien removed his hard hat, excitement evident in the question he posed to Bran Holleran as they exited Greer Motorcycles’ factory.

“That’s actually a misconception,” Bran corrected, removing his own hat and running a hand through his long salt-and-pepper hair. “We don’t mass-produce motorcycles because we custom-build them. Our customer contacts us, tells us specifically what they want in their bike, pays the deposit, and we deliver when it’s completed. Because we work closely with the client, we produce about 200 to 300 bikes a year. The KING One is going to change that number drastically.”

Nore smiled as Bastien’s eyes glazed over, and she could just imagine the visions of motorcycles dancing through his head. He was a complete gearhead. This tour of the Greer Motorcycles factory had been a treat for him. Belle swishing around in the Beast’s library couldn’t have been happier. Seriously, she wouldn’t have been surprised if Bastien broke out in song.

“If you have time, I can take you on a run on the prototype of the KING One.” Bran jerked his chin toward the bay doors. “We have a track out back and they’re testing it now.”

“I swear, he just shivered, Bran. A full-body shiver,” Nore drawled.

“Don’t make fun,” Bastien said, throwing her side-eye. Then he returned his attention to Greer’s cofounder and custom bike builder, “She’s not wrong, though. So the answer to that is a resounding yes.”

Grinning, Bran held out an arm. “This way. We have extra overalls out back that you can change into.”

“That would be incredible.” Bastien started to follow, but then halted, glancing at Nore. “Are you good with that?”

“Of course. You’re doing research.” Nore waved a hand.  
“Have fun.”

“If you want to follow me up to the office, we can have a cup of coffee while we wait on them to finish up. Or we can go watch. Your pick.”

That voice. It vibrated through her, strumming over every erogenous zone, known and unknown. Nore sank her teeth into the inside of her bottom lip, briefly closing her eyes before pasting a smile on her face and turning around to face Joaquin.

“I’ll choose coffee. Thanks.”

Joaquin nodded. “Follow me.”

It should’ve been an easy directive. But when he wore a suit tailored to fit his big body like it had a case of unrequited love, she had problems. Problems focusing on pouring coffee in a roomy break room. Problems concentrating while tailing him up a staircase. Problems drinking said coffee inside the spacious office while keeping a safe distance.

Just...problems.

Sniffing the fragrant brew, she stared out over the vast floor of the busy factory, as awed as she’d been during the tour.

“Joaquin, it’s incredible what you’ve built here. You should be proud.”

She didn’t glance over, but she felt him move next to her. His leather-and-dark-chocolate scent teased her, and she inhaled it, remembering how redolent it was when emanating from his damp skin.

God. She couldn’t escape those memories.

*Do you want to?*

Oh no. She wasn’t touching that.

“I am.”

She waited, but when nothing else came she loosed a soft puff of laughter.

“Man of few words.”

She heard the shrug in his voice.

“No point in lying or pretending a false modesty. I am proud. Admitting that doesn’t mean I, Bran, Shorty and a slew of other people didn’t bust our asses to make Greer what it is today.”

She nodded and finally risked a look over at him. In the two days since she’d seen him, she’d tried to convince herself that the animal magnetism saturating his office and seeping into her skin had been a figment of her imagination. Because that wasn’t a...thing. But staring into his hooded silver eyes, with those thick eyebrows arched over the arrogant blade of a nose, and that wide mouth with its sexy piercing, so incongruent with the suit and trappings of a businessman...

Oh no, she could no longer deny that animal magnetism was definitely a *thing*.

“That’s evident. What’s also clear is everyone here’s a team, and they respect you. That speaks volumes about you as their CEO.” She scanned the almost ruthlessly clean and organized office, the sanitized factory below. “It’s amazing what you’ve done here in ten years. There are a lot of people who can’t claim to have accomplished this with their life’s work.”

He jerked up his chin. “You’ve done the same. Starting your own business at twenty-three with a small business loan that was paid back within three years of opening its doors. Your event-planning service now considered one of the premiere companies in the state.”

Surprise fluttered in her belly, its warmth spreading like butter.

“You’ve done your homework.”

“I always do on those I work with.”

A tightness that had taken up residence in her chest since James had accused Joaquin of acquiring the Main Event’s services strictly to screw with his brother loosened. Until this moment, she hadn’t even acknowledged that James’s assertion still bothered her.

“What is that about?” he murmured, shifting and leaning a shoulder on the window.

“What is what about?”

His gaze flickered over her face, lingering on her mouth for a sizzling moment before returning to her eyes. A weight sank below her belly to settle in a sweet ache between her legs. Only by sheer force of will did she not fidget, squeeze her legs together in a fruitless bid to alleviate it.

“Something just went through your head. And contrary to what you may believe, your face isn’t that skilled in concealing it. But your choice. Talk about it or don’t.”

Blunt. Always so damn blunt. It was a curse...and sometimes a blessing.

“Honesty?” she asked, deliberately throwing them back to the night they’d agreed to forget about.

Deliberately, when it’d been her who’d asked him to leave the past in the past.

God, she had to make up her mind about what she wanted from him.

“Always,” he said.

Memories of the last time they’d traded those words whispered through her. What occurred between them afterward. What they’d shared. What she likely wouldn’t experience again.

Allowing herself to have this man once more, that kind of pleasure again... That was playing a foolish game of Russian roulette. And she wasn’t that capable a gambler.

Switching her gaze away from his intense, molten stare, she peered out the window. Safer that way.

“That you did your research assures me that you came to my company because you have confidence we can do the job you need. And not because...” She trailed off, but finished, “Not because of any affiliation with James.”

“You believe I would sabotage my launch, and by extension, my company just to spite James?” The corner of his mouth curled up in a faint half smile, and he slid his hands in his suit pockets. “Or rather, James believes I would do that. Am I correct?”

“He has...strong opinions about why you hired the Main Event,” she hedged, regretting opening this door.

His mouth twisted into a harder smile that contained a razor edge and sharp enough to draw blood.

“Let me clear up all misconceptions, Nore. Yes, my team conducted their research into your company. But apparently, James must be a silent partner because if I’d known he was in any way connected with the Main Event, I wouldn’t have contracted you. No matter how good you are.” He cocked his head. “Which leads to a question I should’ve asked you in my office. Exactly how involved is James? Because I don’t want him anywhere near my project. I can acknowledge that you know a different man than I do. That you trust him. But I don’t, and I won’t with this launch. If you can’t respect that, you need to tell me now and we can cancel the contract.”

“That won’t be a problem.” The truth backed up in her throat, and for an inexplicable reason it felt like a betrayal not to confess the whole truth to Joaquin about her and his half brother’s relationship.

That she’d sold off part of her company for a song. That she didn’t trust James as far as a nearsighted mole could see him. That she’d never let him near this account. Never.

But the words remained lodged inside her, because to admit them would mean exposing her for a dupe. A lovesick, blind dupe.

It burned a hole in her gut just to think it. To vocalize it aloud? To spy the pity on Joaquin’s face? Or worse? The disgust?

No. She couldn’t bear to see it. And yes, that was pride talking, but she didn’t care. For the last few months, pride had been her only dependable companion.

“Can I ask you a question?” Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed him nod, and she risked fully looking at him again, but played it safe, steering her gaze to his beard.

And then recalled how the springy soft thickness had abraded her breasts and thighs as he’d sucked and kissed her...

Goddammit. Nothing was harmless when it came to this man.

“Was it difficult giving up racing to start Greer? I’ll be the first to admit, I didn’t understand all that I read about your career, but I did get the gist of it. And you were great. It must’ve been difficult to walk away from that.”

“I was great.”

She scrunched her nose. “You really must work on that low self-esteem problem.”

He didn’t smile, but a gleam entered his eyes, making the pewter shine, and her pulse accelerated, throbbing in her temples. If this man ever full-out grinned at her, she might lose her mind and her panties.

Again.

“I told you I don’t believe in false modesty,” he said, shoving off the window and crossing the room, then tossed his coffee cup in the trash can next to the desk. “I wasn’t the usual size or weight of most riders, which should’ve been a limitation. But it wasn’t. I started road racing with the CMRA at seventeen, but I rode bikes long before then. Got on my first one at eleven.”

“Good Lord.” Nore snorted. “Your mother had to love that.”

He studied her for a long moment, a dark eyebrow arched.

“You’re right, she didn’t. But not for the reason you’re assuming. I didn’t just inherit my features from my father, but my love of motorcycles, too. And if my mother could’ve erased both, she would’ve. Since she met Scott, James’s dad, when I was five, she couldn’t hide the fact that he wasn’t my father. But she could conceal everything else—my history, the other half of my DNA—from me. Including my affinity for



bikes. She chalked that up to me hanging around Scott's brother, who owned a garage and worked on them. And yes, it's where I first rode one, but my love for them? My passion for and talent with them? From a father she tried her damndest to exorcise from my life."

"Where was he?" she murmured, loath to move too swiftly, too suddenly. To move at all.

Because any kind of action might stop him from talking, from revealing Joaquin Iverson to her. She should know more about her client. Any good businesswoman would agree. Understanding her customer meant a more efficient and successful job. It meant...

It meant, she was really reaching and making excuses about why she hungered for intimate information on this enigma of a man.

"My father?" A bright glint entered his eyes, hardening them so they matched the stark, forbidding slashes of his cheekbones, the strong line of his jaw beneath his dark blond beard. "Dead."

Hurt for him, for the little boy he'd been, sank inside her like a weighted stone. "Oh, Joaquin," she breathed.

Her palms itched with the urge to cup his face, smooth over his chest, settle over his heart.

She'd never had her father in her life either; he'd left her mother before Nore had been born. Yet Nore had always felt like something had been missing from her life...missing from her. A small part of her had grieved a man who'd abandoned her, hadn't given a shit about her. So she could just imagine the pain of losing a father to death.

But then the ugly twist of his lips pierced that sympathy, and for the first time she noted the outline of his fists in his pants pockets.

"I should explain. My mother told me my father was dead, but what she really meant was dead to her." That tragic caricature of a smile disappeared, but the shadows darkening his gaze remained. Those clenched fists continued to wreck

the crease of his pants. “She lied to me from the time I was old enough to understand. Let me believe my father died in a car accident when I was almost two. The truth was they broke up and she took off, refusing to let him see me.”

Her mind blanked, trying to catch up with all that he’d revealed. Attempting to reconcile actions so...cruel and manipulative with the woman she’d met countless times in the three years she’d dated James. Yes, Mona Whitehead could be opinionated and a little controlling, but this? What Joaquin described? She couldn’t...

She wasn’t even aware of shaking her head until he chuckled, the sound harsh, a little mean.

“What? Hard to believe? Why would the loving, doting Mrs. Scott Whitehead ever do something as callous and heartless as lie to her son about his biological father being alive? I must be lying. Or at the very least, I misunderstood.” He shook his head. “‘Your father drove drunk, ran a red light and crashed into a road barrier,’ is damn hard to misconstrue.”

She believed him. Couldn’t say why she did so readily, so easily. Maybe it was the thin vein of anger...of pain that threaded through his voice that convinced her. Maybe it was that he didn’t try hard to convince her...

Either way, she was just that—convinced.

And it sickened her.

“How did you find out?” she quietly asked.

His voice didn’t lose its sardonic, cutting tone as he said, “At eighteen, I hired a private investigator to find my father’s side of the family, if he had any. My mother said he didn’t, but by that time I’d long stopped accepting everything she’d told me as gospel. So I went searching for them. She’d told the truth about one thing. He didn’t have any biological family left. But while the investigator hadn’t located them, he did find my father.”

“Damn.” She shook her head, her grip tightening around her forgotten cup of coffee. “That had to be one hell of a shock. For you and him.”

He snorted, dipping his head in an abrupt nod. “More so for me since Dad knew I was alive. He and Mom had met and lived in Virginia. When I was about two he’d gotten in some trouble and gone to jail. When he got out three years later, she’d already disappeared with me. By the time he got a job, was back on his feet and had money enough to hire a PI to find us, Mom had married Scott, had James and found an attorney who threatened to bring up every wrongdoing Dad had committed to prove him an unfit father. She wanted him gone from my life as if he never existed.”

“And he conceded?” Disbelief and anger trickled through her at his parents, on his behalf. “He did all that to track you down and then bowed under the pressure?”

“While all this was going on, I had no idea. Mom kept it all from me, and at the end of two years of back and forth, I was fourteen. With his money running out, he couldn’t fight any longer, and he figured I’d come to him when I was of age. Of course, he didn’t know that I believed he was dead.” He loosed a short bark of serrated laughter.

“God, this is...”

“Fucked?”

“I was going to say stranger than fiction but ‘fucked’ works.” Nore turned and set her cold coffee on the small table beside her, the thought of a sip curdling her stomach. “You don’t have to do this, Joaquin,” she belatedly said. Pushing off the window, she stepped closer to him, but drew up short when his eyes narrowed on her. What had been her intention? To touch him? Comfort him? Being intimately acquainted with how he sounded when he came didn’t grant her that permission. And he was her client. She dangerously flirted with crossing a clearly drawn line. “This isn’t my business, so don’t feel obligated...”

Her voice trailed off as his stare intensified.

“Isn’t it your business?” he asked, voice low. “We can claim to have a strictly professional relationship, but the truth is we were more than that before we even fucked in that club. Just through association and word of mouth, you were aware of

me. Close to being family if things had turned out differently, right?” The pierced corner of his mouth quirked. “So yes, Nore, this is your business.”

“This doesn’t—” she sank her teeth into her bottom lip, feeling ridiculous even asking this but “—hurt you talking about it? Some things are better left in the past. Dwelling on them grants them a power over your life they shouldn’t have. Gives them a place they shouldn’t possess.”

She should know. God, she should know. All she had to do was trip over the gravestones of her past relationships to see a pattern set by the dysfunction she’d witnessed over and over again growing up. How pathetic that she’d recognized the problem, vowed never to lower herself to be so needy and had ended up handing over half her business just to be loved?

Very. The answer was very.

“If I didn’t know better, I would take that question as concern,” he murmured, tilting his head and peering at her as if she were a peculiar new species he couldn’t figure out.

“And you know better,” she replied just as softly. Challenging him. This was what she got for being sentimental.

“You don’t need to pretend with me, Nore. Sympathy, kindness, pretending—” he waved a hand, flicking off the emotions he enumerated as if they were annoying gnats “—none of that is necessary for us to get along or work together. I’m not telling you any of this for pity.”

“Why *are* you telling me?”

Because right now, she resented him for giving her this glimpse at the wizard behind the curtain, then berating her for taking a peek.

“So you get who I am. So you get why this company *is*. So you understand why this launch can’t fail. You said some things are best left in the past. I *am* my past. When you’ve been deprived of who you are for most of your childhood and young adulthood, you spend the rest of your life discovering just that. This company exists because I couldn’t walk away from a sport that bonded me with my father even after injuries

had rendered me incapable of riding professionally again. This launch can't fail because this bike is my father's legacy. It's named after him. It's my tribute to him."

"King," she whispered. "His name was King."

He slowly nodded. "His road name was King. His given one was Joaquin, same as mine. Which is why my mother refuses to address me by it. Everyone called him King, though. And it was the only name he answered to."

*Was?*

"Your father..." She swallowed past the thick, terrible emotion lodged in her throat as a looming sense of horror dawned on her. "Your father," she tried again, "he's not... You said you found him at eighteen..."

"I had four years with him before he died in a motorcycle accident. I was twenty-two."

The flint in his tone had her chest constricting and she glanced away from him. Glanced away before he glimpsed the sympathy and concern he'd flat-out told her he didn't want or need from her.

But it would take a stronger woman—a colder woman—than her not to touch him.

Her heart kicked against her ribs, but she didn't allow the deafening rhythm to stop her from approaching him. He watched her, his full, sensual mouth firming into a straight line, but he didn't say anything. Didn't ask her what the hell she was doing. Didn't order her to stop.

So she didn't.

This man's fingers and cock had been inside her, and yet more anxiety worked its way through her now than it had in that VIP area. Somehow, with what he'd revealed, with what he'd shared... This moment seemed more intimate.

She walked up to him, moved past him. Halted next to him. With her gaze fixed on a black-and-white reproduction of the Space Needle at dusk, she reached for him. She couldn't look at him; no, she couldn't look at him and touch him.

Sliding her hand over his palm, she hooked her fingers in his. Tension vibrated from his still frame, and it wrapped around them. Or maybe she just emanated her own. Either way, that tautness filled the room until it possessed its own faint hum, its own spicy flavor.

“I’m sorry, Joaquin,” she said, and when his fingers gave a reflexive flinch around hers, her belly spasmed in response. Warmth swirled, pooling, and she closed her eyes, battling back the erotic pull she couldn’t deny but, dammit, needed to. “I didn’t have a father but there were so many times I wished for a day, an hour, five minutes with him. And you had four years. He must’ve been a good man if he made such an impact on you. So I’m sorry. I’m sorry you didn’t have more time with him. I, more than anyone, understand what an important, priceless gift that would be.”

He didn’t speak.

And for a moment, his fingers curled around hers, squeezing before he stepped back, releasing her hand.

“Let me take you out back to the track so you can see for yourself how the KING One performs.” His shuttered gaze met hers, and if she’d expected to see a softer emotion there, one glance into his steely eyes and his aloof expression disabused that notion. “It might give you ideas for the event.”

She nodded, disappointment zigzagging down the middle of her chest. Damn, she hated like hell that it was there. Hated that she allowed it to matter.

Allowed *him* to matter.

Sometimes it truly sucked being her mother’s daughter.

Forcing a smile, she waved an arm toward the office door. “After you.”

He nodded and stalked across the room. She followed him, suddenly eager to escape the scene of her humiliation. He pulled open the door, but instead of walking through, he stopped short, his big frame blocking the entrance.

“Nore?”

“Yes?” She frowned, staring at the width of his back.

“Thank you.”

Then he walked away, leaving her to stare after him.

## *Eight*

Joaquin pulled into his detached garage, shut off his engine and sat behind the wheel of his Aston Martin for several long moments. For once, he didn't appreciate the meticulously organized shelves and walls with tools and parts or the collection of motorcycles and a couple of cars. For the first time since purchasing his Medina home and arriving here after work, a sense of peace didn't settle over him. It didn't require Sherlock Holmes-level powers of deduction to determine why.

Two words.

Nore Daniels.

Hours had passed since she and her employee left Greer's factory after their tour, but she hadn't evacuated his mind. And he hadn't been able to evict her. And fuck, he'd tried. But he'd been as successful today as he'd been in the last month. Which was not at all.

Shit.

He pinched his forehead, then rubbed it, shaking his head.

The same unease that had wedged between his throat and sternum this morning remained there now, and he curled his free hand around the steering wheel, refusing to massage it. Not that it would do any good. Nothing would erase the cardinal sin he'd committed.

Never, *never*, did he talk about his father.

The most he'd revealed to anyone was telling Bran and Shorty the electric model would be named after him. He hadn't gone into any more detail than that. But with Nore... He ruthlessly scrubbed a hand down his face before dragging it through his hair. With Nore he'd unloaded as if she had a degree and he'd been laid out on her couch.

Unprecedented and unwanted. As in he wanted no parts of this shit.



Doubt and caution screamed, *What the fuck are you doing?* In his small, insular world, trust was a rare, precious commodity, hard won and not casually given. Yet in that office, he'd handed over carefully protected information as if it were Halloween and he was liberally passing out candy to a trick-or-treater.

He couldn't blame it on that gorgeous face with its lovely, wide golden eyes, scalpel-sharp cheekbones and impure mouth. Couldn't fault the body of dangerous curves that he'd mapped with his hands and tongue so it was imprinted on his mind with startling clarity. No, he'd been with beautiful women before. Had hot sex. Okay, maybe not the mind-blowing, dick-twisting sex he'd experienced with Nore, but still good sex. And none had loosened his tongue so he'd spilled the secrets about his past.

But none had been Nore Daniels.

The ex of his half brother.

How did he get past that? How did he explain being so reckless with her? Not him, who might have made a living out of an adrenaline-driven career, but off the bike? Off it, he guarded every word, every move, every fucking breath just in case it betrayed him. When you grew up in the family he did, it became second nature.

He'd only been able to release that pressure valve with very few people—his father, Bran, Shorty... Not Nore Daniels.

But then she'd held his hand.

Her slender, delicate fingers had hooked around his as her soft, husky voice weighed down with regret *for him*.

A meaty fist squeezed his heart even as its partner pumped his cock.

*That* was why he sat in his car, unsettled and unable to escape her.

She'd held his hand.

The peal of his phone rang in the car, and he blinked at its volume. A tight coil of dread spiraled in his gut as he glanced

down at his cell, and he considered not answering it. He didn't believe in premonitions, but he couldn't deny the sense of foreboding warning him who called. And when he picked up the phone and peered down at the screen, that ominous feeling made sense.

His mother.

Goddamn.

Most people got the warm fuzzies when the woman who birthed them called. He just wanted to throw his phone off his dock into Lake Washington. And pray a kraken swallowed it whole.

For a second time, he thought about ignoring it. But he knew Mona Whitehead. She wouldn't give up. Not when she had an agenda and a purpose. His mother would eventually show up on his doorstep, and God knew Joaquin didn't want her tainting the sanctuary of his home. This call was the lesser of two evils.

Teeth clenched so hard a dull ache bloomed along his jaw, he hit the answer button and brought the phone to his ear before he could change his mind.

"Mom," he said, the greeting flat.

"Nathan."

His middle name scraped over his nerves, like fire-tipped nails. He hated it. He'd always hated it. Because whenever she called him that it was a vivid, stark reminder that she resented a part of him.

"What can I do for you?" he asked. No niceties because that wasn't their relationship. She didn't pretend to care how he was doing, and he gave her the same courtesy.

"You can explain to me why you're going to your brother's place of business and bothering him," she snapped.

"Is that how he's telling it?" A hard smile curved his mouth, and bitterness trickled through him. "Interesting."

"How else is he supposed to tell it?" she demanded, voice rising to a shrill, offended note. "It's the truth. Did you or did

you not show up at his office? Did you or did you not approach his partner for a meeting? It's beneath you, Nathan. It's not enough to have your own company and refuse to support or even hire your brother, but now you want to sabotage him? Where did I go wrong with you?"

He waited for her diatribe to peter out, this tirade nothing new. At some point the toxic nature of it shouldn't burn like acid—he should've developed protective scar tissue over the years. But it still scalded; he still forced himself not to flinch.

He still asked himself what he had done—other than be his father's son—to draw her enmity.

In thirty-five years, he hadn't discovered the answer to that mystery.

"Yes, his partner is organizing an event for my company. James neglected to tell you an important piece of information—that I didn't know he worked for the Main Event when I contracted them. They planned another party for Greer a month earlier and he had no part of it nor did he attend, so I don't know why or how I would've been expected to know he worked for them."

"James said this so-called event you've hired them for can be handled by anyone. Now that you *know*—" he could easily imagine her curling her fingers in air quotes "—your brother is an owner of the Main Event, you can easily back out."

"Once again, you've been misinformed," he said, breathing deep to force a calm into his voice that the anger in his chest belied. Leave it to James to run to their mother to fight his battles. He would forever be a mama's boy. Especially when he knew Mona would take his side without fail. "This isn't a simple party, and we're on a tight timeline. His partner is skilled and talented at what she does and I need the best. So I won't be switching to another event planner on such short notice because James is uncomfortable."

"You never have cared about anyone but yourself. Just like your father." She delivered the knockout blow.

And again, not the first time it'd been thrown or that it'd landed. But it could be the first or the thousandth, it hurt. Because she meant it as an insult, as a slur against King and Joaquin.

"I'm sorry you think so negatively of me, although I'm proud to be my father's son. Is there anything else?" He needed to get her off the phone before he started pounding the steering wheel. His only victories with his mother were that he hadn't allowed her to see how her words affected him. He refused to give her that. "I have some work to finish."

"Just because you have a name for yourself and a big house in Medina doesn't mean I'm going to stand by and let you bully your younger brother. All that money and you're still jealous of him. It's sad, Nathan."

The connection ended and he closed his eyes, the phone still pressed to his ear for several long seconds. Even though she no longer tore him down, her voice echoed in his head, and his grip tightened around the cell. Only when pain throbbed in his palm did he loosen his hold and deliberately lower his arm, dropping the phone to the passenger seat.

Part of him acknowledged that he used to answer her calls out of punishment, like a form of self-flagellation. A dysfunction he couldn't understand but also couldn't deny. Somehow, he felt like he deserved her neglect. Her abuse.

And the other part of him—the weaker part—accepted that he'd taken her calls because he wanted her love.

Yes, he was a walking clusterfuck of emotions.

"Dammit," he muttered. Shoving open his door, he exited his car.

The heaviness from his conversation weighed him down as he crossed the drive and climbed the steps to his home. Towering old trees surrounded the two-story house, sheltering it and lending the place an otherworldly feel. With brick patios, decorative French doors, a wide deck where the morning sun greeted him, a dock that sat on Lake Washington, his home was his shelter from the storm of life. But even as he

stepped into the high-beamed foyer and his footsteps echoed over the wide-plank hardwood floor, his chest remained tight with anger, his shoulders stiff with tension.

Without slowing his stride, he stalked through the living room, the dining area, the kitchen, through the French doors and out onto the deck. He circumvented the firepit and strode down the steps to the dock, stripping out of his suit jacket and yanking on his shirt. Pausing long enough on the edge to toe off his shoes, he jumped, the frigid water of Lake Washington swallowing him in its dark depths. For long seconds, he didn't swim for the surface, just let the darkness surround him until his lungs burned, threatened to explode. Only then did he push for the top.

When his head broke the surface, he gasped deep, painful lungfuls of air. Tipping his head back, he treaded water, staring at the sky, and let...go.

## *Nine*

Nore glanced down at her cell, checking the time.

1:32 p.m.

Okay, he was only two minutes late. She stepped back and frowned up at the brick building sitting on the waterfront. In the daylight, the tall, nondescript three-story structure didn't seem like anything special. But she'd been inside, and... She peered down at the phone again, impatience and anxiety ricocheting through her.

In the two weeks since their consultation with Joaquin, Bran and Shorty, she had set up tours of three different venues. And Joaquin had vetoed every one of them. Too small. Too big. Too ugly. Too pretty. Yes. Too. Fucking. Pretty. She still didn't get that one. Shaking her head, she pulled her jacket tighter around her. But this place? This was perfect. Or at least she believed so.

She just hoped Joaquin did.

"Nore."

Nore turned around, facing Joaquin.

Damn him. CEOs shouldn't look so hot with beards and pierced mouths and linebacker shoulders filling out peacoats. It wasn't fair.

"Joaquin, you're late."

He arched an eyebrow. "A meeting ran over. I apologize for the three minutes."

"Sarcasm duly noted. And not appreciated." Turning back to the building and dragging her too-fascinated gaze from his mouth, she said, "If you're ready, they're waiting for us inside."

"Lead the way."

Inhaling a deep breath—and instantly realizing what a mistake it was when leather and chocolate invaded her nostrils and settled on her tongue—she pulled open the smoked-glass front door and entered. And decided breathing wasn't really a necessity.

She stepped into a dim, large, octagon-shaped foyer from which a gorgeous crystal chandelier hung from the cathedral ceiling. Mirrors and ornately framed 1920s-themed photographs were mounted on the padded olive-green walls that resembled cushions. Sconces with rose-colored bulbs cast their light across the vast area, leaving halos along the concrete floor. It was an eclectic space, and just as cool as Nore remembered it.

“What is this place?” Joaquin asked from just behind her, his voice a rumble in her ear.

She battled back the shiver that tried to work its way up her spine.

“A speakeasy,” she said, not glancing over her shoulder at him. It was enough pretending his closeness didn't affect her. “Here's the manager now.”

An older Black woman entered the foyer out of another entryway, a smile wreathing her lovely face. With her dark hair cut close to her head and clothed in a white long-sleeved shirt and gray pin-striped pants with suspenders, she could've stepped right out of the roaring '20s.

“Welcome. You must be Nore Daniels and Joaquin Iverson.” She extended her hand toward Nore. “I'm Helen Moore, the manager of Holt's.” Helen shook Nore's and then Joaquin's hands. “Thank you for considering Holt's for your event. Mr. Iverson, when Ms. Daniels explained the kind of space you desired, I think we have what you need. But let me give you a tour and you can decide for yourself.”

For the next twenty minutes, Helen guided them through the vast space that included a large gathering room with two beautifully appointed bars, high tables and chairs, couches and a stage complete with spotlights above and below it. A mural covered one wall and a floor-to-ceiling window looking out

over a private courtyard the other. Off the main gathering room branched several smaller ones, each boasting smaller versions of a stage, art, couches and tables.

“The bars would be full service, of course, and you are permitted to bring in your own caterer if you’d rather not use ours. The waitstaff would serve throughout the entire space, not just the main room. We would also open the bars in the adjacent rooms. The same goes for those stages in case you would like to showcase other products. You can use as much or as little of our building as you need.” Helen led them back into the main area, turning to face them with a smile. “I’ll give you a few minutes to talk, and then we can discuss your decision.”

With a nod and smile, Helen walked away, but first stopped by the bar and instructed the bartender to provide them with drinks.

“So.” Nore slid onto a barstool and smiled at the young man with the slicked-back hair as he set her red wine in front of her. “Thoughts?”

Joaquin didn’t immediately reply. He picked up his tumbler of whiskey and sipped from it, his silver gaze scanning the room. Nore ordered herself to stop staring at that mobile mouth curved around the lip of the glass and the up-and-down motion of his Adam’s apple. Her fingertips tingled with the urge to caress both.

*He’s a client. Which means he and his Adam’s apple are off-limits.*

“Don’t leave me in suspense,” she said, covering her nerves with a soft laugh.

“Tell me what you’re envisioning,” he ordered, and his voice betrayed none of his thoughts.

“Well, in this would be the main gathering area. I received your guest list so we’re talking two hundred guests, which will fit easily in here. Still, I suggest bringing in your own caterer because we’re thinking about a themed menu along with special themed drinks. On the stage, we would showcase the



KING One. And we could use screens and projectors to run videos of the KING One in action. Its test runs, close-ups. On the various stages in the other alcoves and rooms we can display either different Greer motorcycle models or even specific parts of the KING One that make it unique.” She paused, studied his closed expression. He gave her nothing. “Of course, if these ideas don’t work for you, we can go back to the—”

“It’s perfect.”

She blinked, momentarily stunned into silence.

“Excuse me?” When the corner of his mouth quirked, she snapped out of her stupor, remembering she was a professional, dammit. “Sorry, I was just preparing my argument about why this would work for all your needs and you cut me off at the knees. But you did indeed say this place was perfect. Your words.”

“I did say that.”

“Perfect. You said—”

“Nore,” Joaquin muttered.

She held up her hands, palms out, letting loose a short, low chuckle. “Sorry, sorry. It’s just after three other places I was beginning to doubt I’d ever hear that word.” She smiled, satisfaction radiating through her, warming her. “I’m so glad you like it, though. I do, too. The outside is deceiving, which for me, is part of its charm.”

“I agree. I didn’t know where you were bringing me at first. But stepping inside?” He shook his head. “It’s like entering another era. And I love your ideas. Every one of them. Including displaying the different parts of the KING One on the smaller stages. We can even install boxes that will tell people about those parts and what makes them unique.”

“Or, hear me out,” Nore contradicted, “we can have members of your team, who know the bike inside and out, stationed at the stages to talk to your guests about those parts. It’s more intimate, engaging, and if people have questions, your team can answer them whereas a box cannot.”

Joaquin rubbed a finger over his bottom lip, his steady gaze locked on her.

Nodding, he said, “You’re right. That’s a much better idea.” A smile touched his lips, and the constriction in her chest resonated in her sex. *Don’t you dare fidget on this seat.* “You are really good at what you do.”

The compliment slid under her emerald sheath dress, stroking over suddenly sensitive skin, leaving pebbled flesh behind. She didn’t need his affirmation, but... Fine. It was nice to hear. Especially since James hadn’t given that to her. He’d only told her how much better she would be with him, not how good she was just as herself. That should’ve been a huge red flag. One she’d willfully missed.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “It’s a group effort.”

“And you are the head of that group. Take the compliment.”

Waving off his words again hovered on the tip of her tongue but instead, she stared into those intense, beautiful eyes. How did he do it? How did he so easily twist a person into knots and make them want more than they should? Reach for more than was wise...?

“Would either of you like another drink?” the bartender asked, interrupting and thankfully shattering whatever spell Joaquin so effortlessly weaved around her.

She jerked her gaze from his, switching it to the young man behind the bar, and granting him a smile that was undoubtedly a little too wide and too grateful.

“No, but thank you.”

He nodded. “Let me know if you do.”

Joaquin also turned down a refill, and she couldn’t put off looking at him any longer. But now she’d had a couple of minutes to collect herself and she inhaled a silent breath, the mantra, *He’s a client. He’s a client*, chanting through her head on repeat.

“Once you’re finished—” she dipped her head toward his half-filled tumbler “—I’ll call Helen back in and we can start

getting the contracts signed.” Nore snorted. “It will be nice to nail down a venue. Bastien was about to pull out the big guns. And by that, I mean his Disneyland pamphlets.”

“I don’t know.” Joaquin shrugged a wide shoulder, taking another sip of whiskey. “You should’ve put it on the table. Especially since I’ve never been. It could’ve been fun.”

A record scratched in Nore’s head and she frowned at him.

“That’s not true.”

A dark eyebrow arched and he stared at her over the rim of his glass.

“I think I would be in a more expert position of saying I’ve never been to Disneyland, thank you.”

She waved his sarcasm away with a flick of her fingers. Although it must be noted that it was *excellent* sarcasm.

“Maybe you forgot since the trip occurred a long time ago, but I saw the picture on your mom’s mantel. A family shot with the castle in the background. I remember it because I was a little jealous since I’ve never had the chance to go.”

Joaquin tipped his head back, finishing of the rest of his drink and setting his empty glass on the bar. He didn’t glance at her but stared at the tumbler, twirling it between his fingers. The motion might’ve seemed casual but the tendons standing out in taut relief in his neck belied that impression, as did the tightening of his jaw visible even beneath his beard.

Unease curdled in her belly. Dammit. Why had she brought up this topic? Like ghosts in an attic, some things were better left undisturbed. Because when troubled, they didn’t go back to sleep.

“You’re right. There’s a family picture on the mantel. But I’m not in it.”

Her confusion deepened, and she leaned forward, flattening her palm on the bar.

“So you were somewhere else in the park—”

“No, Nore,” he said, voice as flinty as the gaze he lifted to her. “I wasn’t somewhere in the park. I wasn’t in the park at all. My *family* didn’t include me on the trip.”

Shock barreled through her. She stared at him, unbelieving. Because no. *No*. Her mother could get wrapped up in a man and be forgetful, even neglectful when it came to Nore. But never *cruel*. And what he just described—even the abridged version—was flat-out *cruelty*.

Pain seeped through the shock. Pain for the boy he’d been and the man who sat across from her today. Both still bore the scars of rejection.

“The trip was a gift from Scott’s parents. Mom took that to mean they planned and paid for it for their only grandchild. So she arranged for me to stay with friends while all of them went. Later, I found out she told Scott’s parents I didn’t want to go. She’d lied to them and me. The truth was she just didn’t want me there.”

Until this moment, Mona Whitehead had been a slightly too overprotective but otherwise nice woman and mother. But now... Now, if she stood in front of Nore, she would do a little less respecting her elders and a lot more of treating people how they deserved.

Fury rose swift and hot, searing her. Children were gifts, given to parents to be protected and loved. And as a child who’d been one but not so much the other, she understood the ache, the confusion, the shame of feeling unworthy.

“You do know it’s not your fault that your mother couldn’t give you what she didn’t have.”

Joaquin didn’t reply for such a long moment, she started to believe he wouldn’t. And she cursed herself for overstepping. For forgetting that, yes, she’d dated his useless half brother, but other than sharing orgasms, the only connection she and Joaquin shared was event planner and client.

She sighed. “I’m sor—”

“And what doesn’t she have?” he asked.

“A fucking heart.”

The truth burst out of her, uncensored and raw, and in that moment she didn't give a damn if it offended. But in the next second, with the words echoing between them, she almost flinched. She was talking about his *mother*, after all.

More seconds of silence passed between them, and once more she prepared to apologize but then his lips twitched. Once. Twice. Then slowly curved into a smile. And it was the closest thing to a grin that she'd witnessed on him. Not full-fledged but near enough to set her heart on a hundred-yard dash.

*Holy shit.*

She changed her mind. Before, when she'd been naive and ignorant, she'd wanted to see a no-holds-barred smile spread across his face. God forgive her, for she'd known not what she asked. She hadn't even received her wish and she might fall out.

Reserved Joaquin was brutal beauty.

Teasing Joaquin was effervescent and stunning.

Glancing away, she peered at her empty glass, longing for more wine. Anything to occupy her hands and mouth before she did something incredibly stupid and career-murdering.

"Part of me wants to admonish you for not admonishing me," she said, still not looking at him.

"Part of me thinks I should. But I'm not a hypocrite, so I won't."

She should leave it at that. Let it go. But...

"I'm really glad you had those four years with your father. You deserved those."

Long, thick fingers pinched her chin, gently but firmly turned her head and forced her to meet his gaze. This was the first time he'd voluntarily touched her since their night together and it rippled through her, a current of pure electricity straight to her sex. She tried to stifle the shiver but she couldn't. There was no containing it, and when those silver eyes dipped to her thighs, she knew he hadn't missed it.

Humiliation should've scalded her alive. And later, after she climbed back in her car, maybe it would. But now, with her clit pulsing and an ache yawning deep within her, she couldn't care.

She just wished they were back in that VIP lounge where he could satisfy the hunger.

"Thanking you could become a bad habit for me," he murmured. His thumb swept over the skin under the corner of her mouth, grazing the curve of her bottom lip. She swallowed down a groan. "Thank you, Nore."

"You're welcome," she whispered.

He didn't release her, and she didn't turn her head or remove his hand. No, instead she leaned into his hold, and his thumb pressed harder into her lip, the pressure a firmer touch. A decadent reminder of how his mouth had once possessed hers.

"Excuse me."

Nore startled at the sound of Helen's voice, but Joaquin didn't snatch his grip away. He squeezed her chin, his stare capturing hers for several seconds longer before leaving her skin branded with his touch.

He was the first to turn to Helen. Nore closed her eyes and ordered her hands to remain on her thighs. To not raise them to her face or her mouth to trace the phantom caress she could still feel.

Oh damn, she was in so much trouble.

*He's just my client. He's just my client.*

But as she watched him stand and approach Helen, his taut muscles flexing in a seductive dance beneath his suit jacket, that mantra rang hollow and false.

Oh yes. So much trouble.

## *Ten*

“P<sup>e</sup>rmission to speak freely, sir.”

Joaquin glanced up from his computer screen to see Shorty smiling down at him, her hand raised in a mock salute. Snorting, he leaned back in his office chair, raising an eyebrow.

“Seriously?” He smirked and jerked his chin to the chair in front of the desk. “Sit down before you hurt yourself with that.”

Chuckling, his friend and senior vice president lowered into the visitor’s seat with a sigh.

“It’s almost seven o’clock. When are you going home?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

She gasped, the sound loud and exaggerated. “Leave before the boss? What kind of slacker do you take me for?” She held up a hand. “Don’t answer that.”

He snickered. “Now how about the truth. What’re you still doing here?”

Her smile ebbed and she crossed her legs. He frowned. Shorty didn’t fidget.

“What’s wrong?” he pressed.

“Your mom came by earlier,” she softly said.

He stiffened. Since the phone call three weeks before, he hadn’t heard from his mother. Which wasn’t unusual. Her contacting him at all had been the odd occurrence. Yet now, she’d not only phoned him but had also shown up at his office? He shook his head. This was too much.

“Let me guess, it wasn’t for my birthday,” he drawled. When she narrowed her eyes, he quietly asked, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She pursed her lips, meeting his gaze without glancing away. That's one thing he'd always admired about Shorty. She didn't intimidate easily. And honesty was her default.

“Because you were in a meeting, and I wasn't going to interrupt a professional matter for a personal one. It was a call I made and I stand behind it. Also—” she paused, then inhaled a deep breath “—she didn't come here for a nice mother-son chat. She was here to start some shit about that fuckup brother of yours, and I refused to give her our space and our time to do it. Not on my watch.”

Hurt battled it out with love and gratitude for this woman. Shorty had been with him and Bran from Greer's genesis. They'd known each other, had worked together, been friends, damn near family, for ten short years, and she sought to protect him. Meanwhile, the woman who'd birthed him ignored him, at best. At worst, begrudged every breath he took.

Not that this was new to him. He'd figured that out at six years old when she'd replaced him with a new family and made him feel like an interloper in her husband's home.

And yet... Yet, every ignored birthday...every personal and professional milestone they neglected...every call for money... Didn't matter that he should be immune to their behavior by now, it tore another piece of his soul away.

As it did now.

“She had to love that,” he murmured.

“Yeah, she did,” Shorty teased, but her gaze was watchful, attentive as it roamed his face. “And yes, she was mad. But she was also mad on the sidewalk. Out of respect for you, I didn't match her energy, but Joaquin...” She shook her head. “What the hell? I almost lost it all over your mother. And I was raised to respect my elders. But she almost made me forget my morals and Christianity.”

Despite the topic and the black hole burrowing deep in his chest, he huffed out a short laugh.

“The Christianity is always the first thing to go.” He rocked back in his chair and curled his fingers over the arms. “Thank



you, Shorty. I appreciate you having my back. But I don't want you to worry, okay? I'll handle Mom. And James. You were right not to interrupt my meeting, because that's personal shit and all of our focus needs to be on this launch."

"I sense she's not going to give up," Shorty warned.

"Probably not." Definitely not. "But that's not the only thing on your mind. You've never been afraid to talk about my mother before. What else?" he asked, switching the subject. He had to take Mona in small doses.

Sighing, she propped her elbow on her knee and leaned forward. "Feel free to tell me to mind my business, okay?"

"Okay."

She snorted. "Don't know why I asked. Listen, we're close enough that I can get in your business and you can forgive me. And that I can warn you about what I see and you'll respect my opinion because I am your friend."

"Shorty," he rumbled. "I don't need a disclaimer. Just say what you need to."

"Fine." But again, she paused, and exhaling a long, low breath, finally said, "I know that you and Nore Daniels have more than a platonic relationship. Or you've had."

He slowly straightened, tension and surprise vibrating through him.

"What are you talking about?"

She grimaced. "Believe me, talking about your sex life is not my idea of a great way to pass my evening. It's actually traumatizing and I will be flushing my ears out with bleach after this. But a month ago, after your birthday party, the owner of the club called and asked if he should include the extra hours you spent there with the Main Event's invoice or send it directly to you. Considering you couldn't take your eyes off Nore and I saw you talking to her earlier that night, I put two and two together. I haven't mentioned it because it's none of my business. But now that we've rehired her, you've started spending time with her again *and* James is her ex—not

to mention your mother showing up here is no coincidence—I feel like I have to say something.”

Shit.

He hadn't seen this coming. His fingers curled into a fist and concern wound a path through him, twisting in and out of his ribs like a snake. But that concern wasn't for him; it was for Nore. He could imagine her embarrassment if she discovered Shorty knew about them having sex. Her first worry would be that Shorty didn't respect her or believed that Nore made a habit of sleeping with clients. He and Nore's association might not have been that long, but Joaquin had come to know her well enough to be sure that's the path her mind would travel. In the next instant, he made the decision that this discussion would stay here. Nore wouldn't find out.

He could save her from that.

“One, I will be the only person you say anything to. This conversation won't go past this office. We clear on that?” he asked...ordered.

“Of course.” Shorty nodded. “I wouldn't say anything to Nore just as I haven't brought it up to you until now.”

“Good. And Shorty, as my friend and the vice president of Greer, you have the right to be concerned and to come to me. And I'm not going to lie to you. We were intimate one time, and it was the night of my birthday, but since then, it has only been professional.”

Memories of that smaller, delicate hand squeezing his. Thoughts of him sharing his past with her. The sensation of her skin branding his fingers. *Professional*, he silently scoffed. Not the truth. But dammit, not necessarily a lie either. He hadn't put his dick in her.

*Yet.*

He ground his teeth together, hating his subconscious in this moment. Hating his cock more for pounding in approval.

“People have started out with the best of intentions when it comes to keeping things strictly business, and then let their, uh, feelings become involved,” Shorty pressed. “But this

launch is the next big thing for Greer. I don't have to tell you that—you know it better than any of us. When we're so close to rolling out the KING One, we can't allow anything to derail us. Not distractions. Not negative publicity. Definitely not your half brother. And unintentionally—or intentionally—Nore could be James's way to screw with you...or worse." She stared at him. "It's only been a year since he last called begging you for a loan and cursing you out, demanding shares in Greer. A too-quiet year."

"And you think Nore might be inclined to help him with a little payback. Or corporate intrigue?" He arched an eyebrow. "Sorry, Shorty. But James doesn't have the mental bandwidth for a conspiracy, and Nore..." A frown creased his forehead. "I don't have the details to the circumstances behind their breakup or to how he ended up in her company. Last I'd heard he was working at some retail store in Bellevue. Still, with that...tension between them at our initial consultation? I don't think there's any love lost. And I doubt she would help him cross the damn street, much less come for me."

"You willing to bet your launch's success on it? On her?"

*Yes* leaped to his tongue, but at the last second he couldn't release it. Because a tiny seed of doubt lingered deep in a place he was ashamed to admit even existed. The place where he yearned for acceptance and love from a family that had never made a place for him.

Did he believe Nore plotted against him with James? No.

Did a part of him believe Nore had chosen James first and just by comparison, Joaquin was destined to fail, to be a distant second in her eyes? As he'd always been when it came to his brother? It'd happened with his mother, with Madison...

That *yes* died a slow, agonizing death on his tongue. He tried not to lie to himself. After being deceived about something as basic as the existence of his parent, he abhorred lies. So he didn't answer Shorty's question, but instead skirted it.

"I don't trust anyone with my company but you and Bran."

“Joaquin,” she murmured. “I don’t mean to offend—”

“You didn’t.” He softened his voice. “I promise, you didn’t. I appreciate your concern and that you came to me with it. But there’s no need to worry. I’m good, and we’re good. Okay?”

She sat quietly, studying him. Then she nodded.

“Okay.” Rising from the chair, she smiled at him. “My job here is done so I’m going to head out. And you should, too.”

“I’ll be right behind you.”

With a wave, she left, closing the door behind her. He continued sitting in his chair, staring at the door but not really seeing it, his thoughts on the conversation.

He wanted to dismiss it, put it out of his mind.

But his heart, the one that had been broken far too many times by the people he loved and wanted to be loved by?

Well, that was a different story.

## *Eleven*

“My company jet?” Joaquin stepped into the cabin of Greer’s Cessna Citation Latitude, scanning it as if the answer for why Nore had brought him there would emerge from one of the six executive seats.

He turned to face her as she moved in behind him.

“Patience,” she said, and with a smile that struck him as a little nervous, she skirted him and sank into one of the chairs.

“What’s going on, Nore?”

“I know we agreed on the speakeasy, but I have one more venue to show you. Before I wasted your time, I ran the idea by Bran and he’s not opposed to a destination location. We want to make sure we cover every base to ensure we pull off the best event possible.” She buckled in.

“Excuse me, Mr. Iverson.” A smiling flight attendant appeared next to him and extended an arm toward the cabin. “If you’ll have a seat, the captain is ready to take off now.”

He didn’t move, instead frowned at Nore.

“I don’t like this. No one mentioned anything about leaving the state for this meeting. And for damn sure no one ran by me a destination launch. I should’ve had input on this idea. Because I would’ve nixed it. So this isn’t necessary...”

He couldn’t explain the vise that constricted his ribs, the talons that clawed at his chest. For anyone else, he’d label it panic, but he didn’t have panic attacks. Yes, he liked to be in control; he freely admitted that. With a past like his, where he might have had food, clothes and a home but his emotional stability had been as precarious as taking a stroll on a tightrope while drunk, he needed to be in charge of his world. Especially the company that was his. Because no one had begrudgingly handed it down to him, he hadn’t had to beg for it or feel shame for having it. No, he’d earned it.

And maybe his protectiveness of Greer veered toward over-the-top, but it was all he had in a world that had only taken from him.

“Joaquin.”

Nore’s low, husky voice penetrated the suffocating stranglehold pinning him in place. He met her soft golden-brown gaze and the band around his chest loosened just a fraction.

“You’re right. I should’ve given you more details about today’s destination and meeting. But I guess I also had a little anxiety about your reaction to it considering all the noes in the past. Not that it’s an excuse, because this is your launch and your right to reject any space that doesn’t fit your vision. I’m hoping this does, though.” She stretched a hand toward the seat next toward her. “I apologize for not being completely transparent with you. We haven’t known each other long, but I hope you can believe that I won’t betray the trust you’ve placed in me.”

*You willing to bet your launch’s success on it? On her?*

Shorty’s question whispered through his mind, returning to haunt him.

He stared at Nore, at her lovely face, those beautiful, bright eyes.

Hell.

He glanced at the flight attendant, nodded and moved down the short aisle to the cream-colored leather chair next to Nore and lowered into it. Her lips curved into a smile that lit her gaze like liquid sunshine. And it glowed inside him, warming his veins, as if the sight of that smile on her lips and in her eyes was the source of his pleasure.

He looked away from both.

This was a business relationship. She’d made that more than clear. That was all she wanted when she’d visited his office.

A mistake.

He'd thrown that word out there to describe what he'd been to her, what had happened between them, but she'd jumped all over it. A mistake she had no intention of repeating. He'd better keep that forefront in his mind. No matter how soft or kind those eyes appeared or how pretty and tempting that mouth seemed, he would abide by her request.

\* \* \*

“Disneyland?”

The word raked his raw throat as he turned from the wondrous, sparkling view of Sleeping Beauty's castle to look at the woman beside him. Though the unmistakable landmark castle declared where he stood...though the iconic statue of Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse removed any thought of dreaming...though he'd even suspected this was his destination as soon as they'd landed at John Wayne Airport and driven the thirty minutes to Anaheim... He still couldn't believe he was here. And that Nore was behind it.

“I know this is extremely unorthodox and I am undoubtedly overstepping and being incredibly inappropriate. I mean, I hijacked the company jet for personal reasons.” She huffed out a breath, twisting her hands in front of her. “But you've never been to *Disneyland*. And that seemed like such a crime. Especially *why* you've never been. And well, we're a little under three hours away by plane...” She trailed off, and if she twisted her fingers any harder, she might break them.

He still couldn't speak. Could barely push air past his throat that had swollen to three times its size. He should be angry. And yes, embers of that all-too-familiar emotion kindled in his belly along with a sticky morass of others—wonder, a child's joy, grief, embarrassment. He stood here, like one breathing exposed nerve, feeling *fucking everything*, and worse, she and anyone willing to really look could see it. See him covering these cheery streets like an emotional oil spill.

Blinking, he tore his stinging gaze from her and back to the happiest place on earth, taking in the Halloween-themed park with its massive pumpkins with mouse ears, towering jack o' lanterns on stilts and huge ghosts and witches. Kids of all ages

walked and ran around laughing and screaming, enjoying themselves, eating, talking, heading toward Downtown Disney or the rides.

And oh fuck, did he want to lose himself in it all.

“Say something,” she whispered.

Shifting his attention back to her, he took in the concern darkening her whiskey-bright eyes. Concern for *him*. After she’d done all this—flew from one state to another to create a stolen memory—her first consideration was *for him*.

Oh fuck.

Every reminder that this was a business relationship, and he was a mistake she had no intention of repeating, escaped him and he jerked her into his arms.

“Thank you,” he muttered into her dark curls. Inhaling her fresh, earthy scent into his lungs, he closed his eyes, held her tighter. He cupped the nape of her neck with one hand and threaded his fingers through her curls with the other, tangling and fisting them. Tilting her head back, he pressed his lips to her forehead, her elegantly arched brows, the delicate bridge of her nose. “No one has ever done anything like this for me before. Ever thought to do anything like this for me before. Thank you, Nore.”

*Thank you for looking at me and seeing someone special enough to give this to.*

He brushed his mouth over hers, intending it to be gentle, a symbol of his gratitude only, not sexual. But even as he lifted his head, lips burning just from that barely-there contact, a soft sound escaped Nore and her hand cradled the back of his neck. She shot to the balls of her feet and crushed her lips to his. For a moment, he froze, but only for a moment. That’s how long it took for her sweet, earthy taste to penetrate and he groaned, his good will and restraint turned to dust.

His mouth parted and he took swift control of the kiss, his tongue driving forward, sweeping into hers, tangling with her in a dirty duet that he could never grow tired of. Her nails bit into his skin while the other hand fisted his coat at his back.



Like a starving man, he luxuriated in every lick, desperate for the next suck. And she opened wide for him, surrendering to him even as she countered him.

Jesus, how had he gone without this for months? How had he so arrogantly believed he could resist having this, *her* again?

Only a giggle and a subtle cough penetrated the fog of lust that enshrouded him, and he tore himself out of it with a physical force that was damn near painful.

“So I’m guessing—” she cleared her throat, shifting her hand from his neck to his shoulder before stepping back “—you’re okay with my surprise?”

The corner of his still-tingling mouth quirked. He brushed his fingers against the back of her cheek before lowering his arm to his side.

“Yeah, I’m okay with it.”

“Good.” She clapped her hands together and grinned. “So what are we hitting first? Downtown Disney or Space Mountain? And you’re not leaving here without Mickey ears. Just sayin’.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he said. Shaking his head, he returned her smile and held out his hand. She stared down at it, and after a brief hesitation, accepted it, entwining her fingers with his. “Let’s go.”

The rest of the day passed in a colorful, screaming, beautiful blur of amusement park rides, food that only teenagers should eat, games, shopping on Nore’s part, shows... He tried to pack a childhood into one day. And as he and Nore sat at a table at the Jolly Holiday Café patio after the fireworks, waiting for the thick crowds on Main Street to thin out before they headed for the exit, he could say they’d given it their best try.

He glanced at the woman sitting next to him, her curls shielding part of her lovely profile, and he stretched his arms along the table, his fingers curling into the wood. Either that or stroke those dark strands away from her face, caress that smooth, beautiful brown skin. And he’d taken enough liberties

today. Hell, his mouth still burned from their earlier kiss, and though it was hours later, he swore her taste lingered on his tongue.

Inhaling a breath, which contained the scents of treats from the café's now-closed bakery, he scanned Main Street's buildings and the Matterhorn in the distance. That kiss, her unique flavor, this day—they would all be intertwined in his memories, unable to be separated.

“Holy...” A low, exaggerated gasp came from his right. “I do believe that’s a smile on your face.”

He scoffed. “It’s too dark to see. You’re imagining things.”

“Oh I’m sorry,” Nore drawled. “My mistake. Must’ve been gas.”

He snorted. Then, a moment later, “Thank you for today. It’s been...” The proper words failed him, probably because they became trapped in his too-tight throat.

Her hand gently squeezed his thigh. “You’re welcome.” She tilted her head back, staring up at the trees and dark sky. “Although this wasn’t an altogether altruistic field trip. I did kind of enjoy myself. Just a little bit, mind you.” She held up a finger and thumb, holding them about an inch apart.

“Just a little bit? So that wasn’t you screaming on Guardians of the Galaxy? Got it.” He nodded, smirking.

“Pretty rude of you to mention it,” she grumbled. “But seriously.” She smiled at him. “Thank you for letting me share this day with you. It’s been one of the best days I’ve had in a long time.”

“When was the last one? The last really good day?” he asked, finding himself insatiable for details about her.

Other than her being a business owner and James’s ex, he didn’t know much, and he craved more. What was her favorite color? Movies? Was she a Seattle native or born somewhere else? From today, he’d discovered she loved hot dogs with mustard and relish and disliked ketchup, but what else? What other foods? What made her sad? Happy? Angry?

The questions and the urge to crawl inside Nore's head and mine this information for himself bombarded him and he unconsciously shifted closer, turning toward her. Eager for whatever she would give him. This...need should've warned him, scared him.

But he didn't heed it.

Or maybe, in this moment, in this place, he didn't care.

"My last good day?" she murmured, and he caught the flash of her smile in the shadows. It struck him as wistful, and nothing could've prevented him from sliding a hand under her tight curls and cupping the back of her neck. "That's easy. Several months back I took my best friend Tatum to Vegas. It was a combination girls' trip and bachelorette party before her wedding."

"You two are close?"

"You know how you have Bran and Shorty?" When he nodded, she did as well and said, "That's how I am with Tatum. We've been friends since college. Me and my mother..." She sighed. "Well, I've just accepted we are what we are. Sometimes you just have to meet and love people where they are, because wishing they'd change, wishing your relationship with them would be different, only leads to more pain. For you, not them. Because they're not changing no matter how hard you plead, cry or rage. That's where Tatum comes in. When I met her, she became my family, my sister in every way except blood."

"You're lucky to have that, have her." Because he couldn't help himself—and because it fascinated him, her seeming acceptance of her relationship, or lack of it, with her mother, he asked, "Do you talk to your mom?"

"Sure. I make a point of calling her at least once a month, and if she hasn't fallen in love—" she huffed a small chuckle "—she'll even call me before I reach out. That's our dynamic. That's us. I could accept it or be bitter about it. I decided to accept it so I could have her in my life. She loves me in her own way."

He nodded, letting that settle in his soul. He couldn't help comparing it to his own relationship with his mother. Deciding to put it aside for now, he refocused on her.

“Besides the obvious reasons—I mean, Vegas.” He cocked his head toward her, and she shrugged, grinning. “What made the trip so memorable?”

She peered into the darkness for several seconds, her hand still resting on his thigh, and her fingers contracted on his leg, then relaxed.

“Sorry, I—” She jerked her hand off his leg, cradling it against her chest. “I didn't mean...”

“Shh.” He reclaimed her hand, gently but firmly lowering it back to his thigh, their fingers entangled. “Go ahead. Finish.”

Nore stared at him, and he returned the stare, not offering an explanation for why he held her hand. Because he didn't have one.

“One reason is I got to spend time with my best friend who I hadn't been able to see for a while other than through FaceTime and Zoom calls because she lives in Boston. And then...” She bowed her head. “There was another reason we were in Las Vegas. It hadn't been that long since my breakup with James, and Tatum wanted to get me out of Seattle. More specifically away from him. He'd...broken my heart. I can't even lie about that. Even knowing what I do now about who he is, that doesn't change how I felt about him, and I needed space and time away. She knew that. But instead of this gloomy 'woe is me' trip, we had the best time. And I'd decided to move on from James, to let go.”

*He'd broken my heart.*

*...that doesn't change how I felt about him.*

Pain flared in him like a hot poker. For her. For the echo of hurt and insecurity that crept inside him like a crafty thief.

“It would be easy for me to be bitter about love. Especially given my recent and past history with it. But I look at Tatum and Mark, her fiancé, and I can't doubt that it exists. They are so in love with each other. It practically emanates from them,

and to be with them... It's enough to want to smack 'em." She laughed. "I found this pawnshop, and my plan was just to sell my engagement ring."

He loosed a loud bark of laughter. "Holy shit. You didn't."

"I damn sure did, and for way less than he paid for it, too." She smiled. "So I planned to just get rid of this final symbol of my failed engagement, but then I saw this beautiful brooch."

"The one you wore the night of my birthday party?"

Nore nodded, absurdly pleased he remembered something so small about her. Especially since she recalled every single detail about him.

"The same one. The saleswoman told us about this incredibly romantic legend attached to it—about the owner of it finding their soulmate. On a whim, I decided to lay out the whole six grand for it so my friend could have it on her wedding day when she's marrying her destined other half."

He quietly studied her, searching her golden eyes, touching on every detail of her face.

"You really believe in that? Soulmates? Destiny?"

Nose scrunched, she tilted her head. "We're seconds away from Sleeping Beauty's castle where happily-ever-afters are the norm rather than the exception, right?"

"That's rumor."

"Well, in that case..." She shrugged. "I want to believe. That's all I got." She laughed. "What about you?" She squeezed his fingers. "Do you believe?"

He thought of finding his father. Losing him. Falling in love with Madison. Discovering the truth about her and James, having his heart broken only to find her again...and lose her again.

No, he didn't buy into happily-ever-afters. They belonged in places like Disneyland where magic lived and the doors closed on it at eleven.

Standing, he guided her to her feet and started following the thinning crowd toward the exit.

“Let’s head home.”

## *Twelve*

Nore closed out her calendar for tomorrow, taking note of her early-morning calls and meeting. She opened up an email, jotted down a quick message to Bastien about the conference call with a particularly...exacting client and hit Send. Stretching her arms above her head, she groaned and...smiled as her gaze hit the Cinderella snow globe sitting on the corner of her desk.

Hard to believe just yesterday evening she'd been in California with Joaquin as fireworks lit up a dark sky over Sleeping Beauty's castle. It'd been magical. And that beauty had been in the wonder and quiet joy that had lit his silver eyes.

She'd taken a huge risk with that trip. Persuading Bran had been surprisingly easier than she'd expected, and then getting Joaquin on the plane without betraying where they were headed...? That'd all taken a minor miracle. But his reaction, the expression on his face, the joy, that hug, that kiss... It'd all been worth it. More than worth it. So had spending the day with him as he enjoyed Disneyland for the first time. Maybe, technically, she had given him the gift of going to the amusement park, but he'd really given it to her. Experiencing his delight, it'd been...incomparable.

But it'd been that little half smile and the soft glint of happiness in his gaze as he stared up at those multicolored fireworks that had clued her in that she'd gone too far. That she could no longer lie to herself about him being just a client. Or that their night in that VIP lounge was just a one-off. No. He still set her on fire. Still made her forget her damn name with just a touch of his lips to hers.

She'd been so damn careless.

She'd guarded herself against his physical pull, but had been completely unprepared for and cavalier with the emotional draw. And now it was too late. Her gaze fell on the

snow globe again. Stupid to buy the thing, much less set it on her desk.

Yet she didn't remove it.

Dammit, she'd been careless.

"Where were you yesterday?"

Shit. This was what she got for staying late.

Who was she kidding? This was what she got for letting love blind her into prostituting her dream. And it seemed there would be no end to how long she would pay the price for it.

Smothering a sigh and the anger that sparked to life inside her, Nore leaned back in her chair and gave her ex a narrowed stare.

"A closed door obviously doesn't mean what it used to," she said, voice flat.

"It's not like you were in a meeting." James waved off her objection and dropped down into the chair in front of her desk.

"And it's not like I invited you into my office either," she ground out, powering down her computer. "As it is, I'm getting ready to leave. So whatever you want is going to have to wait until tomorrow."

"Is a trip to Disneyland considered a business expense now?" he asked as if she hadn't spoken. "I'm all for creative financing but I don't think even I could twist that around."

She stared at him, struck speechless. An ugly shock, like being doused with frigid ice water, crashed over her and she froze, unable to move.

James nodded, a sneer riding his mouth. "That's what I thought. Not sure how the happiest place on earth figures into a motorcycle launch."

"I don't have to explain myself to you," she said, finally locating her voice, and dammit, that response sounded so damn lame and *guilty*. And the deepening curl of his lips confirmed it. "The Greer Motorcycles account is not yours and



you have no association with it, so I don't have to justify any decision to you."

"When it's company money you do. And since Bastien was here and he didn't know where you were yesterday, I'm assuming that trip was more personal than professional. If that's the case, then you're wrong. It's absolutely my business."

"Hold up, James." That anger flamed into roaring life, and she had to pause, inhale a deep, calming breath. Okay, no, that didn't work. She had to settle for sounding somewhat calm. "You might work here, but no one here has the right to second-guess my actions."

"I don't just work here. I'm part owner—"

"And that means dick," she snapped. "Don't drop that on me like it's supposed to *mean* something. It might sound impressive to your little friends and the people you wine and dine out there on company funds, but you and I both know you haven't done shit to earn that title except pass a check to me and dole out empty promises."

"Don't make this about us. Relationships don't work out all the time, and you need to let that go. This is about our company and how you're being foolish and blind with a client," he spat the word *client* as if it tasted like shit on his tongue.

"Oh, believe me, I've completely let go of our relationship and am so thankful for that. What I'd like to know is how you discovered where I was yesterday, since I did tell Bastien but he most definitely would not have relayed that information to you."

For the first time since he'd waltzed into her office, his arrogant facade showed cracks.

"Does it matter?"

"Why yes, James, it does matter," she said, an acidic sugar coating her tone. "You came into *my* office uninvited and self-righteously demanding answers, so you can give me that one."

“Fine.” His mouth thinned until it almost disappeared and his eyes narrowed. “I read your emails.”

For the second time in minutes, shock blasted her.

“You did what?” she rasped.

“I read your emails. The flight and amusement park ticket information were in there,” he said, louder, almost defiantly, his chin notched high. “I couldn’t get any answers from Bastien, and it wasn’t like you to be out of the office all day without anyone knowing your location. And since you took on Nathan’s event you’ve been secretive. So I decided to find out what was going on. You haven’t changed your password since we were together so…” He shrugged a shoulder.

“How. Fucking. Dare. You.” She slowly rose from her chair, flattening her palms on her desk. If she could leap across this desk and go for his throat, she would. This self-entitled, spoiled prick. Had he really...? How had she ever...? God, she couldn’t even finish a whole sentence in her head she was that *furious*. “You invaded my privacy, read my private emails, and then you have the *fucking balls* to march in here and demand an explanation from me? *Are you kidding me?*”

“There’s no need for all that, Nore, God.” James winced, standing, too, and thrusting his fingers through his hair. He glanced toward the door, maybe judging the distance and how quick he could get to it. At least he wasn’t as dumb as a box of hair. Just a bag. “I wouldn’t have had to go to those extremes if you had just shared with me—”

“No.” She jabbed a finger at him. “No,” she repeated. “You don’t get to blame me or try to defend your indefensible actions. And FYI, I haven’t been secretive, James. You’ve just suddenly taken an interest in this business. And that your interest comes on the heels of acquiring your brother’s account doesn’t strike me as a coincidence.”

James threw his hands up and barked a hard, ugly laugh.

“So what if it is? What? Am I supposed to feel guilty about not wanting anything related to Nathan near me or what’s mine? For years he’s had his career in racing, had all that

fame, the endorsements and the money that came with it. Did he share any of that with us? Hell no. He helped his deadbeat father out, though. Set him up real nice before he died. Same thing after he started Greer. Wouldn't even give me a job when I asked." He slashed a hand through the air. "I didn't want a handout, just a job. But he wouldn't do that for his family. He acts like we don't exist. And now suddenly, out of the blue, he shows up, needing the services of the company that I partly own? No, something's not right. Now that I have success on my own, he wants to take that away from me, humiliate me. And he'll use anything or anyone he can to do it. Especially if that 'anyone' is my gullible ex-fiancée."

*Maybe if you didn't always expect someone to give you something and earned your own way—hold up, wait.*

"What did you just say to me?" she asked, "gullible ex-fiancée" breaking through her internal diatribe.

"You heard me," he said, mouth twisted, a spiteful glint in his eyes. Why did she have the feeling he was enjoying this? "Like I told you before, you're good at what you do, Nore. But so are a lot of other companies. What makes you special to my half brother, the millionaire who could've gone to any of those more well-known, more established companies, is *me*. It's always been about me, for as long as I can remember, and you're just stepping in the middle of it."

"You sure do have an important opinion of yourself," she said, and hated that the words emerged not as strong, as steady as she'd wanted.

And that James heard it.

His smile was faintly pitying.

And she hated him for it.

"Tell me something, during that flight to California, did Nathan mention Madison?" Nore didn't bother answering, but James didn't grant her time. He settled back in his chair, fingers linked over his flat belly, and smiled up at her. She didn't take her seat again, though from that self-satisfied smile, she probably should. It meant nothing good. "I was

twenty-one and Nathan was twenty-seven. I'd been dating this girl named Madison for about six months. We'd met at a party and had been spending a lot of time together. Come to find out, she'd also been spending a lot of time with Nathan. When he found out, he made her choose—and she chose me. He's never forgiven me for that. So what do you think is the best way to get back at me for winning the woman he loved? Getting the one who loved me, maybe? Even if it's seconds?"

"Why didn't you just add 'sloppy' in there? You damn sure implied it," she whispered.

"I don't think that way, but Nathan?" He shrugged. "I tried to warn you when you took him on as a client but you wouldn't listen. Everything about him coming here, hiring you, is personal. Whatever you plan on getting out of him—connections, money, references—it's all going to be for nothing. Believe me, I know. When it comes to him, it's always for nothing." He paused. "But it doesn't have to be."

Nausea churned and tossed in her belly, and her fingertips pressed into the desktop until a dull ache throbbed in her fingertips.

*So what do you think is the best way to get back at me for winning the woman he loved? Getting the one who loved me, maybe? Even if it's seconds?*

His words bounced off the walls of her head, over and over, growing louder and louder. Striking right at the heart of her every insecurity. Her mother loved her, but Nore had never been a priority. The men parading in and out of her mother's life had; Nore had been second.

In relationships, her mother had always placed the men first, but they hadn't given her the same respect.

Or maybe she didn't demand it.

Pain and soul-deep sadness pulsed inside Nore, and she couldn't speak past it.

James must've mistaken her silence as encouragement because he continued.

“You’ve been to his factory, right? I saw that on your calendar and in your emails that you and Bastien went on a tour a few weeks back. So you saw this new motorcycle that he’s about to launch.” James scooted forward on his chair, his eyes gleaming with an eagerness that had nausea rising. “If you could—”

“No.”

“C’mon, Nore. Do you understand the money we could get for any kind of information on Greer Motorcycles’ latest model? I’ll gladly sell you back my part of the Main Event—”

“Shut up, James. Stop talking. I’m not hearing this. And I can’t believe you would even think about...” She shook her head, hard, and shot up a hand. “You know what? I can no longer say that. I can believe you would consider betraying your own blood like that and thinking I would sink so low to help you—for what? Petty revenge for an imagined slight that hasn’t even been committed against me? And money you somehow feel entitled to just because you’re related?”

She laughed, and it scratched her throat.

“Get out of my office, James. And I’m going to say this once, so make sure you pay attention. I have a professional relationship with Joaquin.” Lies. That bridge hadn’t just been crossed yesterday but torched and the ashes tossed to the wind after that kiss. But damn if she’d let James know that.

“Yesterday was business-related and I had no obligation to explain myself to you then, and I’m just giving you a courtesy now. One you won’t get again. And you’re going to stay away from anything having to do with the Greer Motorcycles account. If I find out you’ve interfered with it again, directly or indirectly, I’ll tell Joaquin myself and I don’t care how it makes this company look. And if you ever violate my privacy again, I will make you regret it.”

His face tightened, red pouring into it. He shot to his feet, his tall body fairly vibrating.

“You can’t—”

“I just did,” she interrupted him with a chin jerk toward the door. “I might have to share this business with you, but not this office. Get out. And don’t come back in unless you’re invited.”

James glared at her one last time, but wisely he didn’t utter another word before he spun on his heel and exited the room. Good of him since he’d just proposed corporate espionage.

As soon as he disappeared, the door closing behind him, she sank down into her chair, the anger deflating from her.

Staring at the door, she just felt...nothing.

\* \* \*

Nore stood at her front door, eyes closed.

She didn’t need to peek through the peephole to see who graced the other side. A glimpse through her living room window at the black Aston Martin sitting at her curb declared the identity of her evening caller.

Pressing her forehead against the wood, she silently cursed. Part of her wanted to turn around and walk right back down the hall, ignoring Joaquin’s presence on her porch. But the other half of her... Well, that hungrier, more foolish half longed to throw open the door and burrow her face against his wide chest.

In the end, she did neither.

She compromised by opening the door but standing safely on the other side of the entryway. Not touching him.

His wide shoulders nearly blocked out the porch light, and hurling herself against his big frame became a close call again.

“Joaquin, what’re you doing here?” She narrowed her eyes. “And do I want to know how you ended up here on my doorstep since I didn’t give you my home address?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Probably not.”

Anger spiked inside her and she shook her head. “Great. Two invasions of privacy in one evening. Must be a record.”

He went still, his shoulders tensing under his black peacoat, his expression carefully blank.

“I don’t know about the first invasion of privacy, but the copy of the venue contract included not just your company’s address but your home one. I came here tonight because I didn’t get a chance to talk to you today and all my calls were going to voice mail. I got a little worried. I apologize for misusing the information, though, and if you want me to leave, I will.”

*Shit.*

She pinched her forehead then rubbed it.

“No, it’s fine. I’m fine.” Stepping back, she waved an arm. “I’m sorry. Come in.”

His gaze bored into hers, but then he moved forward, his leather-and-chocolate scent teasing her like a decadent caress. Closing the door behind him, she mouthed a curse once more. This had “bad idea” written all over it in ’80s style graffiti. Her emotions were bubbling too close to the surface, too volatile. And yet she walked past him, leading the way into her sunken living room. Her tall bay windows allowed the artificial glow from the streetlights into the room, and scattered lamps provided more illumination.

She surveyed the room, attempting to see it through his eyes. Overstuffed couch and love seat with a couple of comfortable armchairs that she loved to curl up in with her favorite books on rainy days. Coffee and side tables with bookshelves, a cushioned alcove, and a large fireplace. It was a cozy room, and her favorite in the house besides her bedroom.

It also revealed a lot about her, and she crossed her arms over her chest as Joaquin silently scanned it. What did he see? Her love of comfort? As a child who’d grown up lacking comfort, she didn’t deprive herself; she refused to. Did he perceive her love of books, of art? It’d been a close call in college between business and a literature degree.

Anxiety rose inside her. Anxiety and longing. The push and pull between wanting to be seen and fear of being exposed.

“So what did you need to talk to me about that was so important?” she asked, dragging his attention away from her home. Or trying to.

He turned, but when that pewter gaze settled on her, more specifically on her face, her throat and lower to her crossed arms, she had the urge to order him to examine the living room again.

“What do *you* need to talk to me about?” he countered.

She started to frown, to object, but at the last second she turned and walked to the dormant fireplace. Would’ve been a nice night for a fire, actually. But she’d just thrown on a sweater and leggings when she’d gotten home along with a couple more blankets on her bed.

And yes, she was mentally stalling and avoiding his question.

With a sigh, she didn’t face him but asked, “How did you know?”

“One, you’re a businesswoman, and you would’ve called me back just to make sure I wasn’t trying to reach you about the launch. That you didn’t clue me in something might be wrong. Second, Bastien left me a voice mail. On his way out for the night, he noticed James going in your office and got a little worried. He, too, tried to call you but no answer. Since he knew we were...together yesterday, he wondered if I would check on you.”

“Well that, along with this visit, is highly inappropriate.”

“Inappropriate?” She didn’t sense him move, but his scent enveloped her, his heat reached out to her. No, she didn’t need that fire. Not with his big body behind her. “We passed inappropriate a long time ago. But definitely last night. Don’t try to close the door now because it’s convenient. Because you’re scared.”

“Who’s Madison?” She lobbed the name at him like a bomb set to detonate. It was self-preservation, and desperate.



“Look at me.”

She stiffened. For the first time since she'd met him, a little fear of *him* trickled inside her. That ominous, dark tone had a shiver tripping down her spine.

“Turn around and look at me, Nore.”

Closing her eyes, she obeyed the underlying steel in his voice, and tipped her head back, meeting his hooded gaze.

“Say that again. When you throw a jab like that at me, at least have the courtesy to look me in the face.”

She should be quaking at that hard voice, at the harder eyes. And yes, she was. But not in fear. That trickle had morphed into another form of anxiety. A sexual anxiety twisted with anticipation and excitement. What did he intend for her and would he make it hurt...good?

Holy hell, who had she become in the last twenty seconds?

“Will you tell me about Madison?” she murmured.

“She was my wife.”

The blow to her chest nearly brought her to her knees. Air whistled in her lungs, and her pulse pounded in her ears.

*His wife?* That didn't... James hadn't... She shook her head.

*His wife?*

“Joaquin...”

“The night of the party, the night we had sex. It would've been our fifth wedding anniversary.”

She briefly closed her eyes, then opened them, meeting his steady, piercing gaze.

“You used me? Is that what the night was about?”

“I needed you. I wanted you. And yes, I wanted to forget and lose myself in you. So yes, I used you.”

“Did it work?”

He stared at her. “Yes.”

“Then good,” she said, voice fierce. “You need to use me again?”

His nostrils flared, his eyes gleamed.

“Yes.”

She fisted the lapel of his coat with one hand, balled her fingers in his hair with the other and surged to the balls of her feet. With zero hesitation, she opened her mouth over his, her tongue thrusting between his lips, tangling and sucking, daring him to meet her, dance with her.

Use her.

Unlike in the amusement park yesterday, there was no hesitation on his part. As if her mouth lit a fuse, he exploded all over her. Both of his hands buried in her hair, his nails grazed her scalp, and she groaned, tipping her head back into those big palms. Quick as lightning, he seized control of the kiss, and she surrendered it. Willingly, with delight and an eagerness that would probably embarrass her later. But now? Now she just wanted his lips, tongue and teeth on her with no mercy.

Those big, hard hands abandoned her hair and slid down her back all the way to her ass, palming her, molding her. He bent at the knees and cupped the back of her thighs, hiking her in the air so she wound her legs around his waist.

Her breath expelled from her lungs into his mouth, and he swallowed it. The thick ridge of his cock rode the flesh between her legs, nudging her clit. Heat flashed through her, at both his show of strength and the hard length that stirred her pleasure, stroking against her over and over.

“Where are we going?” he growled against her lips, keeping up that insane rhythm against her sex.

Good God, how did he expect her to think, much less speak?

“Bedroom.” She gasped as his cock head hit the sensitive bundle at the top of her folds. His pants and her leggings might as well as have been air, that’s how insubstantial they were

when it came to her pleasure. “That way. Second door. Right.” She jerked her head in the direction of the hallway.

He strode toward the hall, his long strides eating up the hardwood floor. In just seconds, he entered her room and set her down on the bed. But quick as a flash she shot off the bed and set a palm to the middle of his chest. The chest that had zero give. A shiver rocked through her. Damn, the man could’ve been chiseled from marble.

She met his gaze, and the smoke there, the lust...

He might’ve used her that night to forget his anniversary, but she harbored no doubts that he desired her. Not with how he looked at her. Like he could break and remake her with the fire in those eyes.

And she’d let him.

She’d let him do every devastating, wondrous thing he wanted. Hell, she’d probably beg for it.

Not breaking their visual connection, she pushed him to the bed, and yes, she acknowledged that she only managed that because he allowed it. Still...he allowed it. And she intended to take full advantage of it. With slightly trembling hands, she shoved his coat from his shoulders. Then stripped his sweater from him, leaving him powerful and half-naked in front of her. Dropping both garments to the floor, she smoothed her hands over his shoulders and arms with a hum of appreciation, of pleasure. He was just so damn beautiful.

“What’re you doing, baby?” he asked, his fingers threading through her hair again, fisting the strands.

She didn’t answer, but continued rubbing her cheek over his pectoral muscle, over the flat nub of his nipple, the washboard ladder of his abs. Retracing the path with her lips, she tasted him, his unique flavor like a delicacy. Impatient, she attacked his slim belt and the closure on his pants, as well as his zipper. Moments later, she dipped her hand into his dark gray boxer briefs and wrapped her fingers around his thick, long cock.

Both of them moaned, their twin sounds of need saturating the air.

He throbbed in her hand, and she squeezed, stroking him from base to tip. A hiss escaped him, his hips surging up to meet the pump of her hand, and that—the twist and grind of his giant body at her machination—had a thrill spiraling through her. Had power crackling over her like a lightning strike.

It was an aphrodisiac.

And yet...it wasn't nearly enough.

Bowing her head, she swept her tongue over the flared head, the musky and delicious and addictive flavor of him an immediate hit to her senses. She was hooked. And there was no way she wasn't returning for more of him.

A rumble like thunder rolled above her, and powerful thighs spread, made space for her even as he held her in place with one hand in her hair and the other cradling her jaw.

“Goddamn, look at you,” he muttered, voice guttural, raw, hungry. “So fucking beautiful, taking me.”

His praise was a caress, and she bloomed under it. Raising higher on her knees, she took more of him, sliding him along her tongue until he nudged the back of her throat. Deliberately breathing through her nose, she relaxed her throat muscles and allowed the tip of him to penetrate her. After a moment, she pulled back, breathing hard, peppering kisses along his length.

“Fuck,” Joaquin rasped, harsh blasts of air punching the room as if he'd run a dash. “Again, baby. Again. Please.”

She obliged. He would never need to beg her. Swirling her tongue around his bulbous tip, and sucking on him, she sank down on him once more. And his groan stroked over her ears, her nipples, the swollen, wet folds of her sex. One hand fisting the fat bottom half of him, she slid the other beneath her leggings, touching her slick flesh. She whimpered, and his fingers tightened in her hair, dragging her off his cock.

“Damn that.” He tugged her head back, leaning over her and crushing his mouth to hers for a hard, brief and hot-as-hell kiss. “If you're going to get off, it's going to be on my dick, not your fingers.”

With that proclamation, he lifted her off the floor and deposited her on the bed. Unlike in the VIP lounge, he stripped them both naked. Having his gorgeous, bare, big body pressing her down into her mattress, covering her from head to toe... Tears burned her eyes and she closed them, squeezed them tight. Wrapping her arms and legs around him, she clung to him and buried her face into his neck, this moment almost too much to contain.

His hand cupped the side of her face, tipping it back, giving her no choice but to meet his gaze.

“Ready, Nore? You with me?”

“Yes.” She arched her back, rubbing her breasts against his chest, gasping at the bright, electric sensations pulsing through her at the contact. Twisting her hips, she ground her sex against his cock, pleading with her body for what she was starting to suspect only he could give her. “Inside me, Joaquin. Now.”

He didn't make her wait. She'd barely finished the sentence before he surged forward, driving himself inside her to the hilt.

Full. So full.

She shifted beneath him, a fine edge of pain mixing deliciously with so much pleasure. They blended seamlessly, heightening each other until she couldn't stay still, couldn't stop...wanting.

“Please...” She twisted, bucked, whimpered. “Move, Joaquin. Please, move.”

“Yeah.” He grunted, slid his hands underneath her, palmed her ass and lifted her up, serving her to him. “God, yeah.”

And he fucked her. Took her. Claimed her.

Broke her.

Remade her.

She wasn't coming out on the other side of this the same. It was more than his cock pistoning into her, dragging over nerve endings and setting them singing. More than him hitting a spot so high and deep inside her that it had her caught between

crawling away from him and clinging to him. More than his fingers all over her sex, rubbing, circling, teasing, making her wetter, hotter. More than those raw, sexy sounds rumbling out of his throat as he pounded into her in a damn near primal rhythm.

It was more.

It was all of that.

With a desperate, needy cry, she reached down between them, and together they caressed her clit in tight, concise circles. And she snapped. In half. In pieces. She exploded so hard, it hurt. Oh God, it hurt. And she embraced that sweet, beautiful pain.

Above her, Joaquin thrust into her, his giant body jerking, then stiffening over her. He grunted into her neck, and he pulsed deep inside her, filling the condom. The last thing she held on to before she tumbled into oblivion was the brush of his lips over her throat and the hoarse call of her name.

And how it sounded like a prayer.

## Thirteen

“Tell me about her?”

Joaquin blinked into the darkness, his arm around Nore’s waist, his face pressed to her chest. Beneath the covers of her bed, their legs tangled, and the musky scent of sex hung thick in the air of her bedroom.

Their sex.

It should’ve felt wrong to talk about the one woman he’d loved and lost while wrapped around another woman, their damp skin pressed together, her heart beating under his ear. Should’ve. But it didn’t. Madison had been his past. And this woman. Well... He didn’t know what she was to him.

She was damn sure here in his present. But the thought of a future with her? It fucking terrified him. Not when *her* past could so easily rip anything away from them. He’d had too much taken from him by his family. Too much. He’d vowed never to let them have that power over him again.

“You don’t have to, Joaquin,” Nore murmured, her fingers whispering through his hair, brushing over his temple. “Only if you want to.”

“I want to,” he said, his voice echoing back to him.

Shifting, he propped his shoulders on the mound of pillows, and before he could gather her close, Nore curled against his side, pressing her breasts to his chest and sliding her arm across his abdomen. She hooked her leg over his hip, her sex a damp, somehow comforting warmth on his thigh. He burrowed his fingers in her hair and slid his other arm under his head.

Staring at the ceiling, he continued, “I was twenty-seven when I met Madison at a fundraiser event. She was a beautiful woman—inside and out. For me, it was love at first sight.” He laughed, and it was rough, ragged against his throat. “Sounds

pretty pathetic for a man my age. Especially when she was twenty-three. But I fell. Hard. I knew, after just five months with her, that she was the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.”

“It doesn’t sound pathetic. Not at all.”

He let loose another chuckle, and closed his eyes, an echo of his humiliation burning in his throat, his chest, even after all these years.

“Oh, you weren’t there. You didn’t see me. I was an athlete. Not to sound like an asshole, but I was used to women throwing themselves at me. Used to them wanting things from me. I wasn’t a fucking amateur with milk on his breath, and yet I didn’t *see*. Not with Madison. I might as well as have been a teenager again. I did everything for her, bought her everything. Paid her bills. Just handed over cash. No questions asked. All because I loved her. What I didn’t know was that she was playing me the whole time. Her and James.”

A small, tight, pained sound escaped Nore, and her arm tightened around him. He tried to relax his body—he did. But he couldn’t breathe past the tension. Couldn’t talk himself through it. And with Nore naked in this bed with him, her scent drying on him, after just being inside her, he hated himself a little for it.

“You know this, though, right? That’s how you know about Madison? James told you this part?”

“No.” Her curls tickled his chin as she shook her head. “He didn’t tell me much. Just hinted that you two were involved with the same woman, she chose him and you never forgave him for it. And he’s been paying for it ever since.”

“Right.” His mouth curled in a bitter smile. “He has the victim role down to a science.”

She pressed a kiss to his pec, settling her hand over his heart.

“Tell me.”

“We were together for five months when I returned home early from a business trip and decided to surprise her. I went



by her apartment but I was shocked when I walked up on her and James and overheard them arguing. About me. He wanted her to get more money from me because he had his eye on a Camaro. Since she'd just asked me for rent money, she couldn't hit me up again so soon, but James told her to get me to buy her a necklace or earrings so she could conveniently *lose* them and he could buy his car."

"Joaquin," she breathed.

Nore propped her elbow on his abdomen and stared down at him, her tawny eyes bright with anger for him but also so soft with hurt. Also for him. It warmed that chill lodged right under his ribs.

"God, I'm so sorry." She cupped his jaw, swept her thumb under his bottom lip. "No one deserves to be treated like that. Least of all you. You gave all of yourself and you should've received all of her in return. Not lies. Not betrayal. And definitely not from the people who are supposed to love you." Fire flashed in her eyes. "I *really*, really wish I knew you back then. I would've woken up every day and chosen violence on your behalf."

He wouldn't have thought himself capable of laughing with true amusement in this moment, but here he was. Laughing,

"What did you do? Did you confront them?"

"No, not right there." An image of Madison and James on that sidewalk in front of her apartment complex, haggling over him as if he were an item up for bid, rolled across his mind's eye like a film. Vivid, in color and in stark detail. "I left without either one of them noticing. Days later, when she expected my return, I invited her to my home for dinner, gifted her with a necklace and told her it would be the last one from me. She could decide to keep it or give it to James for his car."

"Damn," Nore breathed.

"Yeah, damn. At least she didn't try to pretend not to know what I meant. She admitted to first dating James and how he'd convinced her to *meet* me and con money out of me. James just wanted the cash, but her? Apparently, Madison's mother

had stage three breast cancer and piss-poor insurance. It didn't cover all the medical bills, surgery and prescriptions. So she let him convince her to use me."

"She had a choice," Nore snapped, her fist thumping him on the chest. He tipped his gaze down from the ceiling to her again and her narrowed eyes spit fire at him. "Yes, her situation is sad and tragic, and this is coming from someone who lost her grandmother to cancer. But that doesn't give her an excuse or a free pass to use someone else and abuse their trust for her own ends. Her choices may have sucked, yes, but she had them. She could've come clean to you. How about that one? She had the option of coming to you and telling you the truth, and knowing you and your heart, you would've helped her. But she didn't. She continued to lie, and worse, squeeze money out of you to give to James. So not all of it was for altruistic, selfless purposes. No, she doesn't get a pass."

"Calm, baby." He lowered his arm and stroked a hand up and down her back.

She hiked up higher, shoving her face into his.

"You. Deserve. Better," she ground out.

He lifted his head up, pressing his mouth to hers, sliding his tongue over hers and tasting not just her unique flavor but the gift of unconditional kindness and support.

"Thank you for thinking that," he murmured against her lips.

"I don't want your thanks," she said. "I want you to believe it." She touched her forehead to his. "This isn't the end of your story, though. How did Madison end up your wife?"

A heaviness crawled into his body, infiltrated his chest and squatted.

"Three years later, we were visiting one of the local hospitals and dropping gifts off in the pediatric wing. On the way out, I saw Madison. She was waiting at one of the elevators that led to the towers for the oncology units. I thought it was for her mother, but it wasn't—it..."

“It was her,” Nore breathed when Joaquin trailed off. “She had cancer.”

“Stage four breast cancer.” His throat constricted around the words. “The doctors had given her six months. I had her for a year.”

“Did you marry her to give her medical care or because you still loved her or...?” Nore whispered.

“Yes,” Joaquin said, the answer rushing out of him. “All of it. I saw her and the love hadn’t diminished but neither had the hurt, the pain. But knowing her time on this earth could be counted in months, in fucking hours, I didn’t care about that anymore. None of it mattered. And I didn’t want her to worry about anything—not money, not bills, not anything—but taking care of herself and being happy and pain-free for however long she had. She’d already lost her mom, and she didn’t have anyone else. But for a year, we had each other.”

“You, Joaquin Nathan Iverson, are a real-life hero.”

He jolted, and he stared at her, speechless. No one had ever, *ever* called him that. Not even at the height of his racing career.

“How can you say that? You heard the first part of my story where I was a fucking patsy, right? I willingly wore blinders and let myself be played by my brother? And it isn’t heroic to take care of a dying woman who I happened to love. That’s just being human.”

She smiled, and it struck him as wistful, sad.

“You just proved my point. Not everyone would do what you did, Joaquin. Most people wouldn’t marry a person they would lose in months. A person who, sad but true, they would see as a debt, a burden. And that’s not even considering what Madison had done to you in the past. So excuse me if I still see you as one hell of a person. And I think if Madison was alive, she would agree with me.” Given her fierce tone, Joaquin decided against arguing with her. That and the emotion piling into his throat wouldn’t allow him. “And as for being played, well...” She sighed, falling to the pillows beside him, her

shoulder bumping his. “Ask me how James became my business partner.”

“How did James become your business partner?”

When she didn’t immediately answer, he turned his head and looked at her. She now stared at the ceiling.

“I fell in love. Short and not so sweet. You want to talk about being willfully blind? That was me.” She shrugged a shoulder, the movement restless. Maybe embarrassed. “I met him at an event I threw for a client, and he was a guest there. Sound familiar?” She slid a glance at him.

“Please don’t compare what happened between us to you and him,” he growled.

“That’s fair.” She frowned. “It didn’t happen like that with him and me anyway. It wasn’t...combustible. More gradual. He pursued me, and I admit it, I was flattered.” She chuckled but it was dry, brittle. “Flattered and enthralled that someone as handsome and charming as James chased me. And when he caught me, he didn’t let up. At least not at first. But there were other signs that he wasn’t all that he seemed. I just didn’t want to see, so I missed them.”

She turned her head, met his stare. And they looked at each other like that for several long moments. It should’ve been uncomfortable, awkward. But instead, he could’ve remained like that, gazing at her, into those beautiful golden eyes, for hours.

“The first time he suggested that he invest in my company, I laughed it off. He worked at one of those clothing retail companies at the time, and he said he wasn’t happy. I could understand that, but what did he know about event planning? And the Main Event...it’s mine. I built it, was the sole proprietor, and after a lifetime of hand-me-downs and secondhand everything, it was the first thing that was *only* mine and earned from my own hard work. So no, I didn’t want to share it. Not even with the man I’d fallen in love with. But James is persuasive. And by the third time he asked, we’d been together for a little over two years and I said yes. Because he’d proposed, we were going to be married. And if

I'd share the rest of my life with this man, why wouldn't I share my business? At least that's the argument he made, and it was a good one."

She scoffed and rubbed her palm over her chest, right over her heart. As if a pain pulsed under the spot.

"As soon as he gave me that check for twenty thousand dollars and I gave him the title of chief operating officer, he changed. Gone was the attentive, charming, loving man I became engaged to, who made me feel like a priority. Who I'd been in a relationship with for two years. He'd been replaced with a selfish, spoiled, lazy critical boy with a God complex. And he now owned part of my company."

"Baby," he murmured.

Sitting up and propping his shoulders against the headboard, he drew her into his arms. He brushed a kiss across her forehead, and her hand curled around his neck as if grounding herself. And he hoped he could be that anchor for her.

"Has he harmed your business?"

Her small puff of breath caressed his clavicle.

"Depends on your definition of harm. Has he actively sought to destroy it? No. But he's deadweight. A suck on our resources, man power and finances. He spends, but brings nothing in. I've paid back his investment three times over in the year since he's given it to me, and still he refuses to let me buy him out. James likes having the title of COO too much, but likes none of the work. And then he decided he'd rather have the company and not the fiancée." She fell quiet, and when she spoke again, her voice was barely audible. "I sold a part of my company away for love. And every day I have to stare the consequences of my decisions in the face."

Joaquin flipped Nore over, pulling her under him and sliding inside her. Then, when the silken, hot clasp of her felt too damn wet, too damn good, he withdrew, reached for his wallet and a condom, and sheathed himself. In seconds, he wedged himself back between her thighs and thrust deep in her sex again, her sigh of pleasure echoing in his ear.

“No consoling words? No pep talk?” she gasped, arching tight against him.

“Fuck him.” He slid free until only his tip remained inside her, then slowly pushed back in, twisting his hips and rubbing the base of his cock against her clit. Her throaty laughter ended on a whimper. “Fuck him for not seeing who he had in front of him.”

Another thrust.

“Fuck him for taking your love and not treasuring it as the gift it was.”

Thrust and twist.

She cried out.

“And fuck him for fucking up. None of it was, or is, on you. You, Nore Daniels, are fucking perfect.”

Then he proceeded to show her just how perfect.

## *Fourteen*

At the knock on her office door, Nore smothered a groan.

Dammit.

And her morning had been going so well. The caterer for Greer Motorcycles' launch had come up with a great themed menu and a tasting. The speakeasy had sent over the drinks menu as well. Shorty had sent over the guest list and only a few people hadn't RSVP'd. Also, Nore had a new client consultation scheduled in a couple of hours with a Fortune 500 company.

But now James stood in her doorway like a harbinger of doom.

And Mona Whitehead stood right beside him.

Just...dammit.

Had it been only four nights ago that she'd curled next to Joaquin, exhausted from a night of maki—sex.

Sex.

Pump the brakes on that.

Her heart thudded against her sternum. Last time she'd moved so fast, it'd ended in disaster and that disaster strolled into her office, uninvited, once again. That disaster ended in her selling away a part of her dream.

*The fantasy always felt good when it started out, but when the gloss faded...*

But this felt different. Joaquin was different.

*They all feel different.*

God, and here she sat, arguing with herself. She sighed. All signs pointed to “not good.”

“James,” she said, rising from her chair and rounding the desk. She held her hand out to his mother. “Mona, this is a

surprise.”

“A pleasant one, I hope.” Mona smiled and pulled Nora in for a hug, the older woman’s light lilac scent familiar and yes, comforting.

For three years, Mona had been a mother figure to Nore, and even with the tales of how horrible she’d treated Joaquin ringing in her head, Nore’s own memories warred against those tales. How could the doting, at times funny, woman she’d known wear the same cruel, harmful face Joaquin had experienced?

“Of course. It’s good to see you,” Nore murmured, hurt and confusion swirling inside her. “How’re you doing?”

“Fine, fine. But I don’t like not seeing you as much as I used to. Just because you and James are no longer dating doesn’t mean you should be a stranger. I still see you as the daughter I was never blessed with.” She patted Nore’s arm. “And it’s not like you and James are no longer connected since you continue to run a business together.”

“This is true.” Nore slid a glance at James, who leaned a shoulder against her window. This wasn’t the first time Mona had shown up at the office. In the past, she’d visited to take Nore out to lunch or to see James. But a kernel of unease rooted in her belly, twisting. This wasn’t an impromptu, innocent visit. She just knew it. “What brings you by today? Just wanted to see James?”

“Always, but I wanted to talk to you as well.”

The sense of foreboding deepened, but she forced a smile and waved toward an empty chair, taking the other one.

“Please, sit. What can I do for you?” Although she had a suspicion *exactly* what this visit entailed.

“Well, I have to tell you, Nore, I’ve been talking to my son, and what I’ve been hearing saddens and worries me. He’s told me that my other son has been sowing strife here at work between you two. And I hate that for you.” Mona covered Nore’s hand, squeezing it. “James and you aren’t together, but you have a company to run and it’s been going so well. It’s



been so successful. I don't want to see Nathan come in and ruin that for you."

Anger stirred, and she deliberately fought the urge to snatch her hand from under the older woman's. Did she hear herself? Or did she just not care?

Yes, that was most likely the case. She didn't give a damn. Not about what she said and not about her older son.

"Like I told James, taking the Greer Motorcycles account is great for the Main Event. Not just financially but for the connections it will bring. Now, let me apologize that your son brought confidential company business to you when that is not only unethical but also illegal. He shouldn't have burdened you with that," she said, voice so sweet she hoped they both ended up with dentist appointments after this conversation.

Mona's lips firmed before she smiled, but the corners were pulled taut. With narrowed eyes, she tilted her head.

"He just had so much on his mind that he wanted to talk to his mother since Nathan is his brother."

"About the Main Event's business. And if there is strife, then James has it within himself. I don't have a problem with Greer Motorcycles. And since James isn't working on the account *at all in any way whatsoever*, he shouldn't either. Unless this has nothing to do with the account after all, and this visit and this conversation have everything to do with his brother and your son. Which would make it personal. Which would mean it has no place here. At my company. In my office."

"You mean, *our* company," James interjected for the first time.

"Oh, welcome to the conversation," she drawled. "I was wondering if you were going to participate or just let your mother be your mouthpiece. And don't fool yourself. Thirty-five percent doesn't make this our company. I still run it. I still own it. I still have the power. You're just a glorified employee. And even if you never sell that thirty-five percent back to me you will never be what you desperately want—Joaquin."

Mona gasped as crimson poured into James's face. He shoved off the wall, and Nore notched up her chin. And smiled.

"Excuse me," Mona snapped, shooting up from her chair.

Nore stood as well, the anger that had been embers combusting into a five-alarm fire.

"Now, I don't want to disrespect you, so I'm going to ask you to leave my office before I lose my restraint. I refuse to discuss company business with you. I'm not your son. I will say this, though. You have two sons. And the oldest's given name is Joaquin. Not Nathan. And he's worth two of the one standing over there. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

She turned and strode to the door—and drew up short.

Because Joaquin stood in the doorway.

Damn.

He stared at her, his expression carved out of stone, gray eyes hooded, unreadable. After a moment, they left her and shifted to his mother and James.

"Nore." Pause. "Mom. James."

"Isn't this convenient?" James sneered, glancing from James to Nore. "We were talking about you, Nathan. I'm sorry, *Joaquin*."

*You can't leap across this room and put your hands on him. You implemented the no-tolerance policy yourself. And you can't even handle an episode of 60 Days In without cringing.*

The reminders did only a little to calm her. She still wanted to lay James out.

Joaquin arched an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"No," Nore ground out from between gritted teeth. "James was getting ready to escort your mother out because we have nothing further to discuss. Nice to see you again, Mona. Bye, James."

"Not so fast." James crossed his arms, and the corner of his mouth curled.

The devil probably wore the same smile. Possessed the same glint in his—or her—eye. Mean. Vindictive.

“I’m glad you arrived when you did,” James said to Joaquin, though he continued to look at her. “We were having a conversation about strife in the company, and frankly, I think it’s time to clear the air. Nath—I mean, *Joaquin*,” he stressed again, and Joaquin’s eyes narrowed on his brother, “I’ve had a problem with Nore taking on your account, but that shouldn’t be a shock to you considering our...relationship. And at first, Nore was adamant about keeping Greer as a client. But after I explained how much this affected and hurt me, she agreed to have my back as a loyal girlfriend and coworker would.”

Icy dread spread through her like a virus, impossible to root out. It froze her voice box, paralyzing her, and she could only stare in horror as James spun his lies like a malicious spider.

“When she went on that tour at your factory, I asked her to gather details and take notes of that new model of yours. See what we could do with it. Things like that could be valuable for your competitors. Bring some good money in our pockets.” His smile widened into a grin that he turned on Joaquin. “Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Worked once, I figured it could again.”

Joaquin’s face hardened, but he didn’t say a word. Hell, she couldn’t tell if he even breathed.

Fine. She had more than enough words for both of them.

“Get out.” The order emerged as a ragged whisper. “Get. Out. Now,” Nore repeated, and this time it was louder. Strained and hoarse, but louder and firmer. “You are beyond mean and petty. You’re pathetic, jealous and small. You’re such a horrible little boy because you’re damn sure not a man.” She switched her attention to Mona. “This is all your fault. If you hadn’t raised him—and I use the term very loosely—pitted against his older brother, making him think the sun rose and set out of his rotten ass, he wouldn’t be so worthless and corrupt. Now you are responsible not just for the piece of crap he is, but for every life he damages. That’s on you. I hope you can live with it. But honestly, I don’t give a

damn if you can or if you can't. Both of you, out of my office. Now. Or, my elder or not, part owner or not, I'll call security and have them escort you out."

James, for once, used common sense—or his sense of self-preservation—and guided his mother out. She sputtered the whole way, but never did she say a word to Joaquin. And that sent Nore's temper skyrocketing several more degrees. Only Joaquin's still-stony visage kept her rooted. Because James's lies echoed in that office like a death knell.

Madison had betrayed him with James, with lies.

And now James, knowing just where to drive the knife, had thrust and twisted it, using Nore as the weapon.

"Joaquin." She moved forward, her hands stretched toward him. But then she drew up short, lowering her arms. "James lied. I never planned to betray you."

He arched an eyebrow. "All of that? He made it up?"

She splayed her hands wide, palms up. "Yes, no." She briefly closed her eyes, then opened them, met his. "No, he didn't make up the part about approaching me with the plan to take notes about the KING One to your competitors. But I turned that down flat. I would never do that to you. And I told him that."

"But you also didn't tell me about what he proposed. Why?" he asked in that same cold, flat voice.

"I forgot about it, Joaquin," she whispered, risking taking a step forward, her hands stretched toward him. "I honestly forgot because it was so ridiculous that I didn't give it a second thought. I'm sorry I didn't mention it to you. But tell me you believe me."

"I do."

Relief coursed through her. But as fast as it swelled, it disappeared. Evaporated. Because he didn't move toward her. Didn't clasp her hands in his. His expression didn't soften. Those eyes didn't gentle.

"You do?" she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “James has never told the truth and I don’t know why he would suddenly start today.”

She huffed out a breath. “So it’s not so much that you believe me as you’re aware your brother is a snake. I’m not sure if I should be offended or grateful.” She studied him for several long moments, and that seed of dread that had taken root in her belly earlier bloomed. Her breath whistled in her ears and it was all she heard. “Maybe I should hold off on that gratefulness,” she murmured. “Say it.”

“Nore,” he said.

“No.” She shook her head. Shook it hard. “Say it. Or wait.” She shot up a hand. “Let me say it for you. We’re done. Whatever we had or started to have. Or were on our way to having. It’s over. There. Am I right? Did I say it okay?”

His lashes lowered, but then they lifted and he pinned her with a piercing stare that stole her breath. Propelled it right from her body and left a red-hot pain in its wake.

This was what she got for daring to open up again. For sharing her body.

For giving her heart.

When would she learn?

“What I walked in on, Nore... I distance myself from it. By choice. I had to grow up with that shit and I damn sure don’t want it around my company. I thought it would stay separate, but I walk in with my mother and brother discussing it. And James even going so far as threatening everything I’ve worked for. I can’t risk it. I *won’t* risk it. I fooled myself by thinking I could keep you separate from your past with him. It’s not possible. And I won’t put everything on the line. Again.”

“Because this—” she waved a hand back and forth between them “—isn’t worth it. I’m,” she whispered, the desperate, god-awful truth of it hitting her even as she said it, “not worth it.”

“Baby,” he murmured, stepping forward, but she shuffled backward.

“No. You don’t get to call me that, and you definitely don’t get to touch me. Not now. Not ever. You know, I’m so tired of being second, third or not even a consideration in people’s lives. Of being good enough for the ‘meantime’ but never the ‘forever.’ Of not being worthy of the fight. Well, today has shown me something. Has revealed something. I’ve always shown up for everyone else, but not for myself. It’s time I place myself number one. Time I fight for myself. Because I am worthy. And I’m more than worth the risk. But you can’t stop being Mona and James’s victim long enough to see what’s right in front of your face.”

She took another step back.

And then another.

“If you decide that you no longer want us to plan Greer’s launch, I understand. If that’s the case, please let us know in writing. Until then, we don’t have a scheduled meeting, and I have a busy day, so if you could see yourself to the door?”

She turned and headed to her desk, not sinking to her chair until she heard the office door quietly close. And even then, she didn’t sit. She reached for her cell, pulled up her Favorites list and selected the top name. It rang once before the call connected.

“Hey, woman,” Tatum warmly greeted.

“Tate, I need you,” Nore rasped.

“I got you.”

## *Fifteen*

“I figured I’d find you here.”

Joaquin didn’t glance up from cleaning the handlebar on his Kawasaki KZ900. Not even when Bran set a case of beer on the workstation of his garage.

“You can try to ignore me, but I’m not going away. I will drink all of your beer, though,” Bran threatened. Although it was more of a promise than threat. His friend would follow through.

Heaving a sigh, Joaquin tossed down his rag in the pail next to his motorcycle—one of several bikes in the collection he housed in his garage—and rose to his feet. Crossing over to his friend, he grabbed one of the beers, twisted the cap off and tipped it to his mouth.

“Thanks,” he said, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. Because he had manners like that. “You’ve checked on me. You can tell Shorty I’m still breathing. Mission accomplished. There’s the door but I’m keeping the beer. Bring an IPA next time.”

“You’re an ungrateful lil’ shit,” Bran said. And jumped up on the station, doing the *exact opposite* of leaving. “In the ten years of Greer Motorcycles’ existence, you’ve been out of the office one time outside of business trips. And that’s because you had pneumonia. Even then we had to force you to stay in bed and ban you from the building.”

“I remember since I was there. Or rather, not there,” Joaquin drawled.

“But you haven’t been to the office in the last four days. Excuse us if we’re a little concerned and want to make sure you haven’t gone for one of your little dips and decided not to swim back for the shore this time.”

Joaquin slowly lowered his beer bottle and set it down on the counter with a dull thud, his gaze not leaving his partner and friend.

“Didn’t think I knew about that, did you?” Bran murmured. “Yeah, I do.”

“I’ve never considered not swimming back,” Joaquin quietly said.

Bran’s gaze roamed his face, and after several moments, his friend nodded.

“We all need to silence the noise every once in a while. I get it, brother, I really do.” He moved forward, clapped him on the shoulder. “But when do you stop using a jump in the water as a stopgap? You’ve let your past dictate your present and your future for too long. When do you stop running and start living? I knew your dad. Family and freedom. Those two things are what he valued above all else. And he wanted them for you. He would’ve hated knowing you were tied to your past—a past that included him.”

His chin jerked back as if struck.

“What’re you talking about? Dad—finding him, my time with him—was the happiest part of my life...”

“And yet you wear it like chains. Yeah, in some ways, you let him and your time with him motivate you, propel you forward. Like with Greer and the KING One. But in other ways, you let it hold you back, keep you bound. Keep you afraid to love. Afraid to lose. He would be the first to tell you, yeah, shit went to hell with your mother, but he got you out of it, so he would deal with her all over again just to have you. And again, yeah, he only had a few short years with you. But they were the best of his life, and so worth it. You were worth it. Family and love are worth it. Are worth risking everything.”

*I’m so tired of being second, third or not even a consideration in people’s lives. Of being good enough for a “meantime” but never the “forever.” Of not being worthy of the fight.*



Joaquin closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose. What had he done? Had he actually walked out of that office letting her think she wasn't worth the fight? Not just first in his life, but *his life*? When the truth was he was fucking terrified. He was scared to lose. Scared she would find him unworthy. Scared she would walk away from him like others had before.

Just...scared.

But he couldn't live like that anymore. Couldn't live alone, a terrified boy in a man's body.

Couldn't live without...her.

Somewhere between spying her across a crowded club and Main Street Disney, he'd fallen in love with her. And now he'd probably lost her for good. But he couldn't go down without trying to get her back.

Worthy of a fight? He'd show her a hell of one.

"Is our come-to-Jesus moment over? Because I have a case of beer to finish off." Bran held up another beer.

"Bring it up to the house." Joaquin smiled, and it was his first real one in days. "We have work to do."

"It's about damn time," Bran grumbled.

Yeah, it was.

## Sixteen

“I still can’t believe you’re here so close to your wedding. You shouldn’t be, you know,” Nore admonished Tatum, sliding an arm around her best friend’s waist and squeezing.

A part of her still couldn’t believe Tatum stood there with her. A week ago, she’d called Tatum, crying after Joaquin had left her office, and the very next day, her friend had shown up on her doorstep, luggage in hand. And she hadn’t left her since. Even though Nore had assured her she could.

Still, Nore was secretly delighted Tatum had stayed. Damn, it felt good to have her here. When dealing with a broken heart, a girl needed her best friend. But she couldn’t be selfish too much longer. Tatum had a wedding to attend in three more weeks, after all. If she had to stuff the woman in her own Louis Vuitton suitcase, Tatum was returning to Boston tomorrow.

“Listen, when my best friend needs me, I’m there. Mark understands. It’s girl code,” Tatum assured her as they entered the Main Event’s lobby. She’d shown up to take Nore to lunch, and damn, had she mentioned how much she was going to miss her? “Besides, I’m going to see you soon when you come to Boston before the wedding to help me stay sane. And by that I mean run interference with Mark’s mother.” Tatum rolled her eyes. “Lord, I love her but she’s driving me *crazy*.”

Laughing, Nore held up a hand, pinkie extended. “I solemnly swear to cockblock your mother-in-law.”

“*Oh God*.” Tatum slapped her hand down. “Please promise to not say cockblock around my mother-in-law. Promise on your Backstreet Boys poster.”

Nore gasped, splaying her fingers wide over her chest. “You go too far. I’ll swear on the NSYNC poster but not Backstreet Boys.”

“Bitch,” Tatum muttered.

They eyed each other, snickered. Then dissolved into cackles.

“I love you, woman,” Nore whispered. “Thank you for... everything. For being here.”

“Always.”

They moved at the same time, hugging each other tight.

“Uh, excuse me. I hate to interrupt this beautiful Hallmark moment,” Bastien said from behind them.

“And yet you did.” Nore turned around, giving him side-eye.

He grinned, completely unrepentant. “This is true. But I have a question.” He lifted his chin toward the hall leading to the main offices. “I’m just wondering why James’s office is completely cleaned out. And if you were aware of it.”

Nore blinked. And blinked again because surely she hadn’t heard him correctly.

It’d been several days since she’d seen James, but she’d assumed he had been smart for once in his life and was avoiding her. His office door had been closed, and she hadn’t gone knocking. But apparently there seemed to be another reason behind that closed door.

She glanced from Bastien to Tatum, who looked at her. And Nore wondered if the hope she spied in Tatum’s eyes reflected in her own.

“You don’t think...?” Tatum whispered.

Hope lifted her head, and for a moment, Nore let her rise. But only for a moment. Then she pushed her back down. She was through playing with that heffa. In the past few days, she’d given hope too much credit, and she was done with her antics. First, with love, and now with James?

Nope. Not going there.

“No.” Nore shook her head. “James willingly walk away from a free paycheck? Not happening.”

Tatum scrunched her nose. “Point taken.” She tugged on her elbow. “But we have to check out this empty office. Make sure it’s not a figment of our imagination. What could it mean then?”

“That he’s moved into mine?” Nore muttered, only half joking. Because she would *not* put it past him.

The three of them headed down the hall and paused in front of James’s closed office door. Bastien swung it open and she slowly exhaled, staring at the vacant room, where only a desk, a couple of chairs and a file cabinet remained. Nothing personal of him lingered, and once more, hope tried to rise inside her, more persistent. It stayed longer this time before she snuffed it out. Before she could be bitterly disappointed.

Because she knew James Whitehead. And he simply would not walk away. Not when she’d damn near begged with words, tears and money to get him to do it.

Yet this...didn’t make sense either.

“Where did he go?” Bastien whispered as if they stood on the doorstep of a church instead of an empty room.

“To hell, hopefully,” Tatum grumbled.

Nore snorted. “You’ve been hanging around me way too long. Your mother would be perfectly mortified to hear that come out of your mouth.”

Tatum acknowledged that with a smile and shrug.

“James isn’t here and he’s not coming back.”

*Holy shit, that voice.*

Tatum and Bastien whipped around, but Nore didn’t.

That voice. The cotton-and-gravel texture of it had resonated within her from the first moment she’d heard it months ago, and it did now. She smothered the shiver it elicited, refusing to give him that reaction, because those silver eyes would see it; they missed nothing. They never had.

Slowly, she turned around and met Joaquin’s gaze.

“Joaquin,” she said, proud her voice remained calm, even, when everything inside her screamed. “What are you doing here?”

“Two reasons. To break the news about James leaving the Main Event, effective immediately. Well, as of nine last night.”

He had to be lying. And as soon as her heart found its way from her throat and back to her chest, she would demand he tell her the truth.

“How would you know that information?” Tatum asked, her tone slightly belligerent. To be expected since Nore had spent the last week eating ice cream, crying and watching Netflix over this man.

Still, thank God she could ask him because Nore continued to struggle with her breathing.

Joaquin glanced at Tatum but his attention switched back to Nore and held. And that stare touched her to her soul. Maybe deeper. It wasn't fair. He'd rejected her.

He'd hurt her.

She didn't want him to touch her.

“I know because he signed a contract last night returning his thirty-five percent ownership to Nore for a one-time payment of five hundred thousand dollars.”

She was going to faint. A dull roar filled her head.

*Five hundred thou—*

She didn't have that kind of money. Her company did well but... *Oh God.*

“You?” she rasped.

Joaquin nodded, his intense gaze never leaving hers.

“I'm surprised the asshole didn't try to hold out for more,” Tatum bit out.

“You said it,” Bastien muttered.

“He did.” Joaquin smiled, and the warmth in it penetrated Nore's shock. “But I told him he would take the five hundred

or I would sue him for breach of contract since he had shared confidential information about my launch with our mother. And since my attorney advised me I could sue either the Main Event or him personally—and I assured James I would choose him—he accepted the proposal on the table.”

“You have never offered him money before. You’ve never given him money before. Not even a job. Why now?” Nore whispered.

And hope, dammit, that insistent wench wouldn’t leave her alone. Unlike before, Nore didn’t push her away. She let her stay.

Joaquin studied her, his gaze a physical touch that she shook under. And this time, she didn’t try to hide it.

“Because you—your happiness, your security, your peace, your dreams—are more important to me than my past with him. I want to wake up to you every morning. Watch a sunrise with you. Take you for your first motorcycle ride. Stand by your side while you continue to pursue and succeed in your career. I want it all. And I want it free of pain and resentment and bitterness. I can’t love you as you deserve and still hold on to the past. So that’s another reason I paid James off. I was letting go. For both of us.”

“You said there were two reasons,” she said, her voice almost nonexistent.

Tears stung her eyes, and she blinked them back. Beside her, Tatum clasped her hand, squeezing.

Joaquin shrugged a wide shoulder.

“You. That big and that simple. You. I love you, Nore.”

The first tear escaped and she wiped it away. Joaquin took a step toward her, but she held up a hand, forestalling him.

“No.” She shook her head. “You hurt me.”

“I know, baby. And I’m so sorry.”

“And I’m not one of those fairy-tale damsels that need to be rescued.”

“I know that, too. It’s a privilege to be by your side and watch you battle for yourself.”

She nodded.

Then practically leaped across the few feet separating them and threw herself into his arms and crushing her mouth to his. His groan was a balm to her battered soul as his lips parted and kissed her with a passion that left her breathless and hungry for an hour and an empty office. Thank God they now had one right behind them.

“I love you,” she murmured, peppering his chin and jaw with kisses. “I’m so in love with you.”

He laughed, and his arms locked tight around her, lifting her clean off the floor.

“Baby, I didn’t think I would hear those words from you. I love you more.”

He took her mouth again, and she gave in to the sweetest, hottest kiss.

Tipping her head back, she grinned up at Joaquin, trailing her fingertips through his beard.

“Ask me again if I believe in soulmates and destiny,” she said, reminding him of the question he’d put to her during their Disneyland outing.

He smiled and pressed his lips to her forehead, her nose and finally, her lips.

“Do you believe in that? Soulmates and destiny?”

“I’m looking at you, so yes. Yes, I do.”

## *Epilogue*

“So I actually get to hold the famous brooch.”

Nore peered over her shoulder at Joaquin as he cradled the brooch, and the beautiful piece appeared even more delicate in his big hand.

A hand he'd just used to gift her with an orgasm that answered the question that yes, indeed, life did exist on Saturn, thank you very much.

God, she loved that hand.

And him.

“Yes, and here.” She passed him several sheets of white tissue paper and a silver-and-white gift box. “Would you wrap that for me? I need to finish packing if I'm going to make it to the airport on time.”

Still studying the jewelry, Joaquin accepted the paper and box, and she returned to folding up the clothes she needed for her trip to Boston. Tatum's wedding wasn't for another week, but they'd planned for her to come out ahead of time to help with last-minute details. Such as Plan Mother-in-Law. That would be in full effect as soon as Nore landed at Logan.

“Do you really believe in the legend?”

Nore glanced up from placing the stilettos that would go with her maid of honor's dress into her suitcase to look at Joaquin. He still held the brooch, his head cocked to the side, and he seemed fascinated by it.

Stepping away from her bed and luggage, she walked over and paused in front of him, staring down at the jewelry as well. Unable to not touch him when so close, she encircled his wrist, feeling his strong pulse under her fingers.

God, she loved him.



It'd been only weeks since he'd shown up at her office declaring his love for her in something out of a straight-to-streaming romance movie, and she'd fallen deeper in love with him every day. She suspected it would always be like that, and considering she planned on spending a lot of years with him, that was a long plunge.

She was okay with that, too.

Especially since she knew she wouldn't be taking the plunge alone.

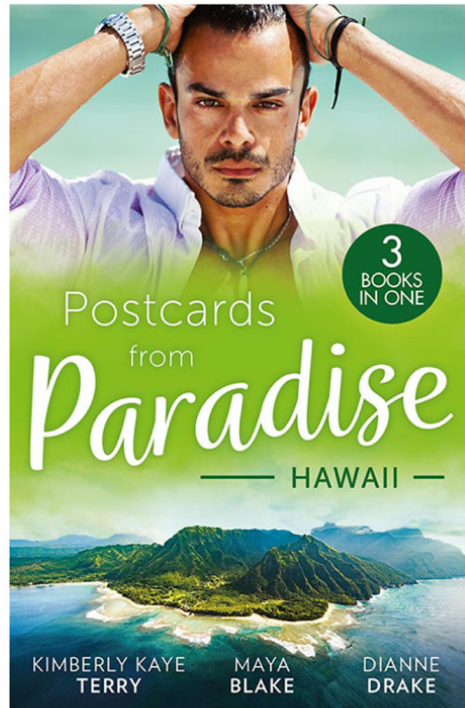
"I don't know," she said, answering his question. "I mean, it brought me to you. And our path damn sure wasn't easy." She chuckled. "But I believe more than anything, our love is true and lasting." With a shrug, she leaned her head back and smiled up at him. "So yes, I guess I do believe in the legend."

His solemn, quiet gaze moved from the brooch to her face, and it roamed over her for several seconds before meeting her eyes.

"I do, too, baby. I do, too."

\* \* \* \* \*

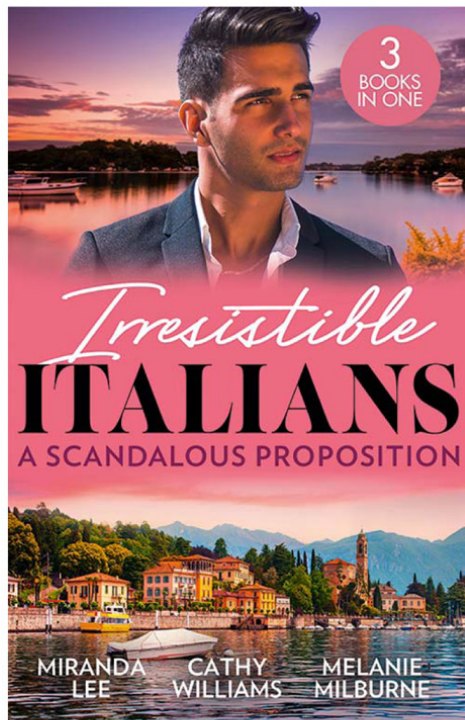
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