



LEGALLY

Yours

Nicole French

Legally Yours

A Novel

Nicole French

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To my husband, who always thought I could do it.

And to my mom, the incurable romantic in the family.

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Chapter 1

I glanced over the top of my cubicle toward the window about ten feet away. The snow was coming down harder, in big, fat flakes that shone white against the black night and stuck to the pane whenever a sudden gust of wind slammed them into the building. I looked back at the clock on the opposite wall and sighed. You would never know by the looks of the office that it was almost nine o'clock.

The “Pit,” as everyone called the group of cubicles that housed temps and interns, was full of hopeful, third-year over-achievers like myself. The four of us still at the desks had one week left on the job before the trial was over. After working the standard summer internship at Sterling Grove’s full service law firm, I had been asked, along with the other three interns, to stay on through the fall when the firm took on a major trial case. The trial had finished up last week, and the firm had won, with some thanks due to the countless hours of document review and paperwork I’d been doing for the last four months. My hard work had paid off—like two of the other interns who’d already taken positions with the firm as of September, I’d been offered a position at the firm for after I had finished school and passed the bar exam. It was no small carrot—the firm was one of the largest full-service firms in Boston, and subsequently offered some of the most coveted positions for any new J.D.

Unlike most of the other interns, however, I wasn’t actually sure I wanted to work at Sterling Grove. It wasn’t that it wasn’t a good place to work (despite the first year associate

hours that would be undoubtedly hellish). There was simply something missing. Two and a half years ago, I had shirked a job in investment banking for law school, hoping to find a career that would make me feel, well, complete. Law had seemed like a good idea—it was lucrative, analytical, and had the potential to do more for the world than just stockpiling money. Upon starting my classes, I quickly learned that I loved the philosophical elements of the law just as much as the practical—law school was a practice of existing somewhere in the middle.

The difficulty came in choosing a focus. Two and a half years later, when most of my classmates already had jobs locked for the following year, I still had absolutely no clue what I wanted to do with my degree. I had excelled in my classes and attracted three job offers through various internships, but had turned all of them down. Although I was interested in almost all of the classes, clinics, and internships I had participated in over the past two and a half years, nothing made me feel that “umph”, that one-hundred-percent knowledge that *this* was what I was supposed to do. Two and a half years later, I was still looking.

“I see you looking for a cab, Crosby.”

A face with a pair of thick black glasses, bright white teeth, and a thick mop of curly black hair popped over the cubicle barrier. I smiled, careful to avoid his eyes.

“I’m not looking for anything, Steve,” I said. “Anyway, I’m not sure I’m going anyway.”

“What?”

Steve Kramer, a third-year from Boston College, looked around briefly to make sure none of our supervising associates were in the large common room before skittering around the barrier to sit uncomfortably close to me on my desk, disregarding the legal pad under his butt. The two other interns who shared my cubicle glanced up with mild annoyance before leaning back to the papers strewn about their own desks.

“Dude,” Steve said as he grabbed the arms of my desk chair and rolled me to face him. “You gotta come. The trial is finally over. It’s our last drunken hurrah as interns together.” He didn’t seem to notice when I immediately rolled back to my original position.

“I know, but it’s already so late. Plus, the weather is turning to shit, and I really need to finish this brief tonight, you know?”

“Finishing a brief” was an easy way of using legal jargon that you didn’t want to spend time with them. To many in the profession, it was like saying you needed to wash your hair or walk your dog. Unfortunately, for all the promise Steve showed as a cutthroat attorney, he never seemed to clue into basic social cues from women.

“Come on, Crosby,” he cajoled, pulling my chair close to him again. “I’m not letting you go until you say yes. It’s our last time out together as interns to celebrate the end of this insane internship. You don’t even have to pay—Cherie knows the owner and got us all comp’d pitchers.”

It wasn’t really the end yet—we had a whole week. But considering the fact that classes were starting on Monday, it

was more fitting to celebrate the end now instead of next Friday, when most of us would be more interested in getting ahead on course reading than tipping back shots.

Manny's was a well-known bar in Chinatown and just a short cab ride away from the office. I wasn't much of a drinker, which made me less than excited about going. Nor was I particularly interested in fending off the obvious advances of Steve, who had been trying to talk me into a date with him since September. He was decent-looking, but, like most of the men I'd been out with, just didn't quite do it for me. Apparently I seemed to have the same problem with men that I did choosing a job.

I sighed.

"You know he's not going to leave you alone until you say yes."

I glanced over to a neighboring cubicle, where Eric, my classmate and another intern, hadn't even looked up from his work to make the dry comment. I then looked back at Steve, who wagged his prominent eyebrows. I sighed again.

"Fine!" I said, and turned around to my desk. "I'm going, I'm going. Can I get back to work now?"

~

We arrived at the tail end of Happy Hour while the band was finishing their sound check. We weren't alone—Manny's attracted the twenty-something young professional crowd of Boston, most of whom consisted of lawyers, bankers, and graduate students working around Beacon Hill and downtown. The men wore the standard after-work uniform of suit pants

and striped button-down shirts, their matching jackets tossed over the backs of chairs and their ties loosened around their collars as they tossed back cheap beer. The women were dressed much like myself, in pencil skirts and pantsuits, their blouses undone an extra button to make it clear this wasn't an interview situation. I kept my buttons where they were.

I filed into the small booth that had been claimed by my cohorts and allowed Steve to hang my coat up on the hooks next to us. Steve and Cherie jetted off to the bar and returned shortly with a tray full of tequila shots and a pitcher of PBR. Everyone eagerly took one of the shot glasses and the accompanying limes. I was the last to take one after Steve looked pointedly at me. With a quick eye roll, I raised my shot along with everyone else.

“This is the end,” Steve intoned, mimicking the words of Jim Morrison. “My only friend, the end.”

“Shut up and drink,” jeered Cherie.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Steve protested, stopping everyone from drinking. “I bought the shots, I get to toast. Okay. It's been a pleasure working with you all, and I'd just like to say: may you all finish the year without flunking out of law school on your last semester. May you all succeed and get filthy rich like I know you want to with these overpriced degrees. May you all make name partner within five years. Except not at Sterling, because that's going to be me.”

We all yelled and threw balled up napkins and cardboard coasters at him before raising our glasses and gulping down the harsh liquor. It was the cheap stuff, of course, but it would no doubt accomplish everyone's goals of getting as trashed as

possibly while liquor was half price. Steve began to dole out PBR-filled pint glasses.

“Thanks, but I’m good,” I said, slipping out of the booth to his obvious disappointment. “Don’t worry, I’m just going to get my own drink.”

“Too good for the blue ribbon, huh?” Steve teased.

“Everyone’s too good for that horse piss,” I retorted with a grin before turning to make my way over to the bar, where I ordered a whiskey with a splash of water.

“Not a PBR fan?”

I turned to find a reasonably handsome guy leaning against the bar next to me. Like the other guys in the bar, he also wore a button-down and suit pants, with his sleeves rolled up his forearms to reveal an expensive and ostentatious watch. The top button of his blue striped shirt was undone, his dark blue tie was slightly askew. He was cute, in the young M.B.A.-kind of way, with close cut brown hair and a clean, square jaw lined with a trimmed goatee. He also held a glass of brown liquor, which he raised in acknowledgment of my drink.

“Not so much,” I said as I slipped the bartender my card and nodded that she could cash me out.

“Trevor,” he said, reaching out a hand to shake mine.

“Skylar,” I said. I took a sip of my whiskey and closed my eyes in pleasure. It wasn’t the best stuff in the world, but Manny’s kept a few decent bottles around.

“What are you guys celebrating over there?” Trevor asked.

“The end of a trial,” I replied as I opened my eyes. “We’re all law interns.”

“Ah,” Trevor said knowingly, although his lack of further response made it clear that he knew little about anything concerning law school. “I’m an analyst over at Chase.”

He said it in a way that was obviously meant to impress me, but I just nodded briefly. While he probably didn’t know much about my life, I was extremely familiar with his, having worked for a year at Goldman Sachs myself before applying to law school. One year had been enough to convince me I needed to do something else to make money that wouldn’t make me feel like I was losing my soul and sacrificing others’ in the process.

But despite his occupation, Trevor had a nice face and was smart enough to provide an engaging distraction from Steve’s obvious glances my way. I was in no hurry to return to the booth, and after talking with Trevor for two more drinks, I started thinking about other places we might go to do something else to celebrate the end of my internship.

It had been a long time—too long for someone my age who had no attachments and no hang-ups about casual sex. But I would have been lying if I said that any of those encounters were more than barely satisfying—most of them had simply scratched a strong, primal itch to be with another person, but also ended up with me scratching myself better, later, alone.

It didn’t help that when I did get attached, it was with the worst people on the planet. Out of the two major relationships I’d had, the first, my high school sweetheart, was currently

servicing time for aggravated assault. East New York wasn't even a great place to live now—poor Robbie hadn't stood a chance with the remains of the New York City mafia living within a five block radius of his house throughout our childhood. The second...well, let's just say I avoided talking about him at all. Patrick's serial philandering had left a scar that was still fairly raw.

So my classmates knew me as a loner, but that didn't mean I wanted it to be that way. Just because things hadn't worked out before didn't mean they couldn't in the future.

I looked up at Trevor, who was jabbering about some kind of deal he had made that week. He stopped when he looked down to find me staring at him.

“Something wrong?” he asked. “You need another drink?”

I looked down at the remnants of my third glass of whiskey, which was nearly empty. I had reached my self-imposed limit for the night, where I was tipsy but wouldn't be hungover the next morning.

I pushed the glass away.

“Let's dance,” I told him, and held out my hand so he could lead me to the back of the bar, where several people had started an impromptu dance floor next to the juke box. As the lazy riffs of “Beast of Burden” came on, Trevor pulled me into his chest and swayed awkwardly and out of sync with the music while Steve, Eric, and Cherie all watched with obvious interest. He smelled like cheap bourbon and body spray, but I enjoyed at least the way his arms wrapped tightly around my waist and the way the muscles of his chest felt beneath my cheek.

“Hey,” he said as the Stones launched into the chorus the second time. I looked up and he touched his nose to mine. All right, why not? I thought. Jagger asked if he was strong enough, and I closed my eyes as Trevor leaned down to kiss me.

His tongue slipped into my mouth and touched my tongue before darting out again. He did this again. And then again. It was...not pleasant. Like being kissed by a frog or a snake. When I pulled away, he moved his mouth, rubbery and wet, to my neck before leaning back with obvious, drunken desire gleaming in his muddy brown eyes.

“You’re really hot, you know that?” His words were slightly slurred. “I have a total thing for redheads, and you are seriously gorgeous.”

“Thanks,” I muttered. My long red hair, which was wavy, unruly, and roughly the color of an heirloom tomato, was almost always the subject of tired come-ons. I was proud of my natural hair color, but was like these guys couldn’t literally couldn’t see anything but the top of my head.

“You want to get out of here? My place is just off Newberry.” Like Chase, the street name was meant to impress—Newberry was a nice part of town, and expensive.

Five minutes ago, I might have said yes, but I had no intention of having sex with Captain Jabbing Tongue that night. I gently untangled myself from Trevor’s arms and was careful not to answer the question. “I’m going to stop in the ladies’ room.”

Trevor nodded happily. “I’ll just go close out my tab.”

I ducked through the crowd back to the booth, where Cherie hooted and Steve pretended not to notice I was there.

“I’m going to head out,” I told them as I quickly grabbed my coat from hooks next to the booth.

“Skylar’s gonna get some!” Cherie crowed, clearly worse for wear. “I saw you making out on the dance floor. Girl got a hot date!”

I snorted. “Hardly. Trying to get rid of one, if you know what I mean. I’ll see you guys on Monday. Tell Eric I said bye.”

Cherie and Steve waved slurred good-byes, although Steve’s was a bit lackluster. I checked the bar, where Trevor was patiently waiting for a bartender to ring him up. I waited until he had turned back to sign his tab, and then slipped around the other patrons of the now-crowded space and out the front door.

Outside I was met by the makings of a full-on Nor’easter as a blast of snow and wind pummeled me in the face. At least ten other people were standing on the curb, trying without any luck to hail cabs as they drove by, all of them occupied.

“Shit,” I muttered, checking to make sure Trevor hadn’t yet come out behind me. I buttoned up my wool pea coat and wound my scarf around my neck, wishing I had foregone fashion in favor of a pair of pants and my goose-down parka. It might have made me look like the Michelin Man, but at least I’d be warm right now. The nearest T-stop was at least ten blocks from here, and I was going to have to walk. Damn.

“Skylar!”

As one particularly cold gust nearly knocked me over, a cab stopped in front of the bar, revealing Eric peeking out the back window.

“Hey!” I greeted him as I stepped out to the car. “I thought you were already gone.”

“You’re never going to catch a cab right now. Need a lift? Caleb is dropping me at a friend’s place a few blocks away before he takes this one back to Chestnut Hill.” He nodded his head at the unfamiliar guy sitting in the front, who waved to me. “You could call for a car and wait at my friend’s place if you want. That is, unless you wanted to go home with Douchebag in there.” He nodded back toward the bar with a grin.

I followed his glance to where I could see Trevor pushing open the pub door. I turned back in a hurry. “Shove over and let me in, will you?”

~

Chapter 2

The cab dropped Eric and me in front of an enormous house on Beacon Street that directly faced the Commons. It was built in the nineteenth-century style common to so much of Boston, with a wide brick exterior punctuated by black bay windows running up its five or six stories. Unlike most of the buildings surrounding the park, the double-doored entrance didn't have the telltale buzzer that usually marked multiple units in the building. Only one occupant lived here. I turned to Eric.

“A friend?” I joked. “Or sugar mama?”

“You're fucking hilarious,” Eric said as he waved goodbye to Caleb. “She just works here.”

Handsome in an Alexander Skarsgård kind of way, Eric had a reputation as something of a player in our class. I had known him since starting law school almost three years ago, and thought of him more like an annoying brother-type. We shared the same dislike of group social gatherings, but for slightly different reasons. I didn't like to mix business and pleasure, whereas Eric tended to do it a bit too much, and his exploits often crossed paths too often at group functions.

“Anyway, definitely no sugar,” he said. “She's a housekeeper for some rich bastard. Place is freaking amazing, but she lives downstairs in the mother-in-law. She's allowed to have guests, but no one after one or something like that.” He shrugged. “It's nothing serious.”

I grimaced. “Gross, man. You didn’t have to invite me on your booty call.”

He laughed as he walked toward the house. “Don’t worry. I’m sure we can wait at least until your car comes.”

“Wanna bet?” I asked, but dutifully followed.

The snow was starting to come down harder, and already the pavement was covered with a thick blanket of the stuff. I cursed myself for forgetting my snow boots, which I normally totes with me to and from work in the winter. Boston sidewalks in the winter were no place for Manolos.

“Careful!” Eric called back as he turned past the gate at the steps and took the short flight down to a basement-level entrance, where he pressed a doorbell.

“She doesn’t answer the regular door?” I asked.

“Servants’ quarters,” he said with a smirk. “I guess most of the houses like this on the park have them converted into something different, like a garage, but this guy had them remodeled for the help. He is seriously loaded. He has a live-in cook and a driver too.”

Eric shook his head, feigning disgust, but the obvious longing in his voice was harder to hide. Who wouldn’t want that kind of money?

“Hey mister, come on in!”

The door was answered by a petite, pretty girl with wildly curly brown hair and a small, broad nose. The slight lilt in her voice informed me that she wasn’t originally from the United States, and as she smiled at me warmly, I couldn’t help thinking that was to her benefit. People in New England

weren't known for welcoming strangers into their homes, but she looked at me as though I were an old friend.

“Hi, I've been waiting for you! Come in, *lindos*, you look frozen!”

Eric and I followed her through a narrow hallway that ended in a large common room outfitted with two massive sectional sofas facing a flat screen TV and a small kitchenette at the far end. Across the room a doorway led to another hallway, where I could see several doors in the dim light and a large staircase leading up to the main part of the house.

“Thanks for letting me wait here for a car,” I said. “Walking around in this stuff is murder on shoes, you know?”

“No problem,” she said, her accent more apparent now. “I know exactly what you mean. I'm Ana, by the way.”

“Skylar,” I returned. I took her hand, but was surprised when she pulled me in for a quick peck to each cheek. “Where are you from?”

She smiled again. “Obviously not from here, huh? I'm moved from Brazil a few years ago. I like to see how people react when I kiss them on the cheek. New Englanders are so nervous about it, it's so funny!”

“Well, I'm not from New England,” I said. “New Yorker, born and bred. We're not quite so skittish.”

She laughed with a nod and pointed to a rack where I could hang my coat. Eric's was already there, along with his shoes, pointed neatly out from the door.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he said, wrapping his arms around Ana's impossibly tiny waist and nuzzling her neck. “David and

Phoebe around?”

“No, David is on vacation this weekend. Went to Miami, lucky duck. Phoebe is off too,” she said as she leaned into his embrace. Their easy touch with each other made me chest squeeze a little with envy. Some people seemed to find that kind of rapport so easy.

“What about the Lord?” Eric was asking. “Think he’d care if I stuck around tonight?”

“Well, he’s not home right now. Why do you want to know, you naughty boy?”

I took a seat on the couch and thumbed fixedly at my phone while Eric and Ana said their very intimate hellos. After a few more minutes, she turned to me.

“Skylar,” she asked. “Have you ever had a *caipirinha*?”

“No.” I looked up and shook my head. “Can’t say that I have. What is it?”

“It’s a Brazilian drink made with *cachaça*, which is kind of like a rum.”

“Oh, I’ve already had a few tonight. And it’s getting kind of late.” According to my phone, it was almost eleven-thirty.

“Come on, Crosby, have a few with us,” Eric wheedled from behind Ana. “It’s a Friday night, right? You gotta have some fun some time, and there’s nobody here gonna try to feel you up. Only Ana has to deal with that.” He mercilessly pinched Ana’s butt, causing her to shriek and scamper away from him.

“It’ll be the perfect thing to warm you up before you go out into the cold again,” she added, heading into the kitchenette. “I’ll make you one. You hate it, no problem. You like it, maybe you have another, eh?”

“Okay, okay,” I relented with a grin. She was so sweet and friendly, it was hard to say no. I could see why Eric wanted to come over, even for just an hour. Or, apparently, the entire night.

Unsurprisingly, the drink was delicious, a light blend of lime and sweetness without the cloying taste of rum. I had already knocked back two and was dancing samba with Ana in my stockinged feet before I thought to check the time on my phone again.

“Oh, shit!” I yelped. “It’s past midnight! I really have to call a car to get going if I’m going to catch the T home.”

“You do that,” said Eric, who had taken my place with Ana in a much, much more intimate way of dancing. I sank into the couch while he maneuvered her toward the hallway on the other side of the apartment.

“Eric!” she batted him helplessly on the shoulder but allowed herself to be steered away. “Skylar, make yourself at home,” she called in between bouts of giggles. “I just, ah, have to show Eric something in my room.”

With that lame excuse, they were gone, leaving me trying to find service in order to call a cab. I stood up and paced around the room, trying unsuccessfully to find a signal.

“Shit,” I muttered to myself as a throaty laugh floated down the hall. I glanced that way, becoming more and more

uncomfortable with each giggle. I wasn't overly eager to listen to Eric having his way with Ana, no matter how charming she was. Aside from the fact that it skeeved me out to listen to my pseudo-brother getting it on with his lay of the week, I didn't care for the reminder of just how easy it was for some women to enjoy themselves.

Maybe I wouldn't have been so frustrated if the lackluster reaction I'd had to Trevor were the exception and not the norm. Unfortunately, it always seemed to come back to that, whether it was during the first, crucial kiss, or later on, when I was supposed to be screaming with ecstasy and not overthinking the way the sheets were rumped under my back.

It wasn't that I was into the wrong gender either. No, I was definitely interested in men, but they just couldn't seem to keep me focused long enough to enjoy myself. It didn't take much for me to become distracted by the lighting in the bedroom, the uncomfortable chafing between bodies, or the weird way the light caught on someone's nose. It didn't help that most guys couldn't seem to distinguish my clit from my elbow, or if they could, didn't have a damn clue what to do with it. Maybe some girls (like Ana) could get off from pure friction, but I sure as hell wasn't one of them.

Another, much louder giggle escaped from the direction of Ana's room, followed by an ominous thump. I grimaced and headed toward the stairs in search of a better signal, eager to escape the increasingly more provocative sounds echoing down the hall. Ana had said when I'd arrived that the owner wasn't yet home, so I decided to take my chances with trespassing upstairs in order to escape what was starting to sound like an amateur porn flick.

~

I opened the door at the top of the stairs into one of the largest and most beautiful kitchens I had ever seen. The entire thing was easily as large as my apartment on campus, with dark wood cabinetry and white marbled countertops bordering the periphery. Two huge farmhouse sinks faced each other on each side of the kitchen, bookending a double oven and a six-burner Viking stove. An enormous refrigerator was set into the walls between large picture windows that looked out onto a small courtyard garden planted over the servants' quarters. In the middle of the kitchen was a large, marble-topped island, surrounded by several stools and topped by a hanging rack of copper pots and pans. Another large room containing a tufted, cream chaise lounge and a farmhouse table led directly off the kitchen, creating a sense of space and luxury in a common area that still managed to be comfortable. I wasn't much of a cook, but if I were, this would undoubtedly be my dream kitchen.

I checked my phone, but still found myself in an obvious dead zone, so I pushed through the kitchen door into a hallway that passed a bathroom and led into another massive, open room. A huge, white stone fireplace lorded over one wall, and gaping bay windows looked out on the snowy Commons. The dark wood floors that continued from the kitchen were covered with several plush sheepskin rugs, the kind that begged a person to fall asleep right on them in front of a crackling fire. The walls looked like they had the original dark wood wainscoting, above which the walls were painted a warm cream color and were covered with a number of gorgeous modern art pieces.

Whoever had decorated the place knew their business, or paid someone who did. The aesthetic was both warm yet posh, traditional yet modern, inviting yet imperious. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that every furnishing in the room was likely worth more than everything I owned put together, but I felt oddly comfortable there, wishing for nothing more than to sink into one of the overstuffed sofas for a long nap.

I walked over to one of the windows and looked out at the park, which was nearly deserted in the weather. Beacon Street was also quiet as the occasional car made its way very, very slowly down the road, careful on the not-yet salted concrete. The snow was quickly morphing into a blizzard; snowflakes were coming down in sideways droves. The T-Stop was only a half-mile away, but it might as well have been thirty.

I sat down on the wide sill of one of the bay windows, which was trimmed with a few pillows for such moments. Nights like these made me yearn for the comforts of my family's cozy old house in Brooklyn, with its wide front porch and my room carved into the attic. There I would snuggle up in the armchair next to the window and watch the winter snow gather on the oak tree outside while my father and grandmother chattered downstairs about the news and politics.

Bubbe and my grandfather had owned the house for almost thirty-five years before he had passed away when I was a baby. Suddenly my father, a city sanitation employee who never in a million years thought he'd own property in New York, much less in one of the few areas of the Brooklyn where you could still live in a single-family house on a tree-lined street, was the co-owner of a million-dollar piece of real estate. Since I had left for law school, it was just the two of

them in the drafty old place. But they refused to sell it, and kept my bedroom door open for me whenever I was able to come home for a visit.

That was happening less and less these days. I had lived in the house with Dad and Bubbe while in and during my year on Wall Street, but went running to Boston when I was offered a partial scholarship at Harvard. So far, I felt certain I had made the right choice, but the demanding schedule of classes, studying, and interning had reduced my bimonthly visits to holiday weekends and breaks.

I pressed my nose up to the cold glass. My dad would love being stuck at home on a snow day like this, when he wouldn't have to collect garbage at the crack of dawn, but could sit in his armchair all day if he wanted to. Before college, I'd join him, playing Risk and watching old movies until we crashed on the faded plaid couch in the living room. A snow day in Flatbush was magical; in Boston, it often felt cold and unfriendly. Except maybe in a house like this.

The front doors suddenly swept open with a loud bang. I jumped up from the windowsill, sending my phone sliding onto the floor with a clatter. I scrambled around trying to find it, and when I stood up, I found four pairs of eyes staring at me curiously.

There were three men, all of whom looked to be in their thirties or early forties, and who were dressed impeccably in tailored suits and the kind of cashmere overcoats that cost as much as my food budget for a year. One had brown hair and a pair of smudged glasses. Another had a mustache framing very thin lips. The third was probably the handsomest man I had

ever seen, towering over the other two with height and a generally imposing presence. Clean shaven but for a bit of stubble, he had a ruddy, tanned complexion that betrayed a life that couldn't be lived entirely in an office, and ear-length, sandy blonde hair brushed back from his face. The wind had forced a few stray locks to topple forward in that sexy, carefree way only certain men can pull off. He looked edible.

The other person was a very pretty woman, also dressed in a suit and overcoat, albeit much more fitted ones. With black hair tied back from her face, very pale skin, and bright red lips that shined in the dimmed light, she was beautiful in that severe way only a few very powerful women can pull off. All four people stared at me as though I were a stray animal that had managed to find its way inside the house. Come to think of it, that wasn't an entirely erroneous characterization.

"Sterling," said the mustached man with a mischievous grin. "You didn't tell us you had company waiting for you."

"No," said the woman in a tone that implied she was not at all happy with my presence. "He didn't."

"I didn't know I had," said the blond man, who, even as his companions turned toward him, continued to stare at me in a way that made me feel as if my limbs were frozen in place. Our eyes locked, and even in the dim light across the room, I could see that his were a brilliant blue, the color of an Alpine lake. I felt my mouth drop slightly, but couldn't do anything about it. Inwardly I chided myself as I stood like a damn statue, completely transfixed by this man's stare. He was, quite simply, mesmerizing, but I couldn't have explained to anyone why.

“Sterling? You all right, man?”

The brown-haired man’s voice broke the spell, and my cell phone clattered again to the floor as I lost my grip on it. I blinked, able to move at last.

“God, I’m so sorry,” I said, scrambling down to grasp at my phone. “I’m a friend of...ah...Ana’s...shit, I’m on my way out.”

I practically tripped over my feet as I ducked around Sterling and his friends, running down the hallway toward the stairs. I thundered down to the servant’s quarters, dug my coat and shoes out of the front closet, and opened the door while I was still pushing my arms into my coat. I escaped back into the intensifying blizzard while the clear sounds of her and Eric’s ecstasy rang in my ears, reminding me yet again of what I couldn’t quite attain. As I started the long walk across the park to the nearest T station, I recalled the blazing blue of Sterling’s eyes. Somehow, I doubted the women he knew ever had that problem.

~

Chapter 3

It wasn't until I was about halfway through the park that I heard a voice echoing behind me.

“Wait! Miss! I don't know your name, but will you just *stop!*”

I turned around to find Sterling bounding doggedly through the snow after me. He stumbled and nearly fell on a crack in the sidewalk, but rebounded with the reflexes of a trained athlete and caught up with me in a few more steps. A few more errant locks fell across his forehead, and I was faced with a smile that made my legs feel as if they were immersed in a hot tub, not the frigid New England air blowing up my skirt.

“Do you always go wandering through the Commons after midnight?” he asked as he regained his breath. “It's not exactly safe. Especially for someone like you.”

I didn't have to ask what he meant by that, considering my size and gender. Instead, I flushed, suddenly embarrassed by my idiocy. I wasn't some hayseed from the hills. In my desperation to escape that house and the very disturbing effect that, well, *this man* seemed to have on me, I had done what every city dweller knows not to do: wander a public park at night.

“You left without saying good bye,” he said with a sardonic lift of an eyebrow. “I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name. Or what you were doing in my house.”

“God,” I said, finally finding my voice, but only able to look everywhere but directly at him. Like the sun, he exuded energy so bright I couldn’t look. So instead, I rambled.

“I’m so sorry about that. I’m a friend of Ana’s, your housekeeper. She just let me in for a minute, but had to go, uh, deal with something in her room. I didn’t have any cell reception down there, so I came upstairs to find a signal. She had no idea, really, so please don’t blame her. I didn’t mean to intrude in your, space, truly.” I couldn’t stop babbling until Sterling placed his hands on my shoulder and squatted down so his chiseled features were at the same level as mine.

“It’s okay,” he intoned overly slowly, and I found myself rolling my eyes at his playful tone before I could help myself.

“Sorry,” I said again, but clearly the babbling stage was over.

“Your name?” he prompted again, releasing my shoulders and standing back up.

When I forced myself to look up again, I realized again just how very tall he was. A frame that must have been close to six-four filled out a charcoal-gray suit in a way that made me wonder just how much time he spent wearing a suit and how much time he spent at the gym.

“Yum,” I whispered before I could stop to think.

“Your name is Yum?”

“Oh, no,” I said, flushing an even deeper red. “Christ. Sorry. It’s Skylar.”

“Skylar Crosby?” he asked quickly.

I frowned at him, suddenly suspicious. I wasn't cold like Bostonians, but as a New Yorker, I had a strong sense of self-protection and suspicion. A stranger knowing my name definitely qualified for both.

"Yes..." I said, taking a few steps backward. "How did you know that?"

"I make it a point to know all of my employees' names," he said with a brief, white smile. "Even the interns. Skylar is a memorable one."

Even though it was snowing outside, that was when I truly froze. The dots connected, and I suddenly realized who this was: Brandon Sterling, the elusive, youngest partner at the firm who also happened to be its founder and majority shareholder. He was a legend in the office, but hadn't been seen once by any intern. That in and of itself wasn't unusual—we were disposable labor, so most of the partners were unlikely to take much interest in us. But even most of the junior associates who oversaw our work had never met him personally. He was a phantom.

"Oh, Jesus," I breathed as the realization kicked in. "Jesus *Christ*."

"No, just me, I'm afraid," he replied with another bright smile. "Although it's a nice comparison."

"I'm so sorry, sir," I spluttered. "Oh my god, oh god, I was intruding on your home, and I really shouldn't have. A friend of a friend invited me in to wait for a car inside because of the weather, but it was completely inappropriate. I only went upstairs to find cell reception, and then you walked in..."

Shut up, shut up, he already knows this, shut up! My inner dialogue went crazy trying to censor the constant blather once again pouring out of my mouth. When I looked up at Sterling's face again, I was mortified to see him trying unsuccessfully not to laugh.

"Ms. Crosby," he interrupted gently with another smile. "Really. Don't worry about it."

"I'm just...very sorry for intruding," I said lamely. "And for babbling. It's something I do when I'm..."

"When you're what?"

"Ah, nervous," I admitted.

"You'll have to fix that if you want to be a litigator," he joked, causing me to turn bright red all over again. Fuck, could things get any worse? Although I wasn't sure I wanted a job offer from Sterling Grove, it would have given me a springboard to any other job I wanted. I could as good as kiss that good bye now.

"It's all right," Sterling said yet again, patting me gently on the arm. In the cold, his touch seared through the heavy wool. He shivered, and for the first time, I realized he had chased me into the snow in only his gray suit and very expensive-looking leather shoes, which were already getting obvious watermarks from the snow around the tips. I looked down at my feet. My Manolos were also as good as ruined.

"I'm going to head back inside," he said, tossing his head in the direction of his house. "Care to join me?"

"Oh no, sir, I'm really fine," I said. "The T is just down this path, and it goes right back to Cambridge."

Sterling glanced at his watch, which also looked very shiny and very expensive, but not flashy like that fool's from the bar. Subtle. Tasteful.

"It's almost one," he said. "You probably already missed the last train, if you don't get robbed in the park on your way there. Come on. My driver's out of town, but I'll call you a car while you wait."

When I hesitated, he reached out and squeezed my hand before letting it go, an intimate gesture that seemed to alarm him a bit too.

"What kind of boss would I be if I made my interns stay until after midnight but didn't give them a ride home?"

"Ah..." For some reason I couldn't quite tell him that his office wasn't the reason I was out so late.

"Let's go," he said again in a tone that brooked no argument, and started to make his way through the snowdrifts back across the street.

~

Someone (most like Ana) had wised up to Sterling's presence while he was chasing after me, and a large fire was alive in the fireplace when we entered the house again, this time through the grand double-door entrance. There was no sign of his three companions—the house appeared to be empty but for him and me. Sterling slipped off his shoes and carried them over to the fireplace, setting them down on the hearth while I loitered awkwardly by the doors.

"Have a seat," he said, nodding at one of the overstuffed couches I had been dying to fall into only minutes before. "I'll

be back in a minute.”

He disappeared up the large set of stairs that rose from the foyer while cautiously I followed his instructions. When he returned, he was carrying a rolled up newspaper and a small box covered in scratches and various paint splashes. He had removed his jacket, vest, and tie, and was decidedly more informal with his shirt unbuttoned at the throat and rolled up at the arms. Though it was practically identical to the outfits of just about every other young professional in the bar that evening, there was something about the way the tendons in his forearms tested the limits of his rolled-up sleeves that made my mouth water, as if his casual regalia were trying to tame an animalism that was literally splitting seams to escape. Padding silently across the thick carpet in his socked feet, he looked reminded me of lion tracking its prey.

“May I?” he asked, kneeling in front of me and taking the heel of my shoe in his hand. Wordlessly, I watched as he slid my pumps off each foot, carefully setting my stockinged feet back down onto the sheepskin. When he looked up, our eyes caught once more, as they had when I had first seen him. The moment quickly passed as he cleared his throat and stood up.

“Manolos,” he said, holding up one of my prized pumps. “The lady has expensive taste.”

“The lady has only one pair,” I responded sadly. “So I hope you’re not going to throw them in the fire.”

“Hardly,” he said, the r of the word flattening with a surprisingly thick Boston accent. He set my shoes down on the mantle next to his own and proceeded to stuff all of them with crumpled newspaper.

“They’re not too wet,” he said. “So I don’t think the fire will damage them at all, just help them dry. I’ll put some oil on them, though, if you’re all right with that.”

He opened up the box, which contained a rudimentary shoe shining kit that looked like it had been used extensively by multiple generations of people. The top of it, I realized, had wooden brace for a shoe to fit, so that you could prop your foot up for someone else to polish it.

“Where did you get that?” I asked. “It looks like an antique.”

“It was my father’s,” Sterling replied absently as he rummaged around and finally located a container of clear balm. He proceeded to dip a stained brush into the jar and rub it onto his shoes, one at a time.

“Oh, are you close?”

The question came out before I thought about the possibility of being inappropriate. Sterling glanced up sharply for a half second before returning to his work, brushing the polish into my shoes with vigor.

“He’s not around anymore,” he said carefully.

“Oh,” I said. “I’m so sorry to hear that. And I shouldn’t intrude. Again.”

He looked up again, this time kindly.

“Skylar,” he said, and it was then I realized how much more I liked hearing my given name rolling off his tongue instead of the more appropriate “Ms. Crosby.” Much like before, the ‘r’ at the end wasn’t quite pronounced, rolling open

with a subtle New England cadence that betrayed a working class accent he hadn't quite eradicated.

“Yes?”

“You apologize too much,” he said. “It’s all right.”

“I’m so—” I started before catching myself. He gave me a cheeky half-smile, and I couldn’t help but grin back. “Right,” I amended. “Okay.”

“Exactly,” he said with a wink before turning back to finish polishing our shoes.

Ana entered the room with a tray bearing a teapot, a cup, and a selection of teabags. Upon noticing my presence on the couch, her expression briefly morphed into surprise before sliding back into easy affability when Sterling turned around to thank her.

“I believe you know Ms. Crosby, Ana,” he said from his seat by the fire.

“Ah, yes, sir, a bit. I, um...”

“It’s all right, Ana,” Sterling said, echoing his words from a moment before. I wondered if he tired of constantly having to reassure all the women in his life of that fact. Clearly he was disruptive to many of them. “You’re done for the night.”

“Yes, sir,” she said before leaving. “Good night.” With a quick, unreadable glance at me, she was gone, no doubt to gossip with Eric, if he was even still here, about what I was doing upstairs.

“Please,” Sterling said, indicating the tea. “You look frozen, so help yourself. I’ll call for a car and get another cup.”

He lifted himself easily from the hearth, and I couldn't help but watch his finely shaped form as he strode out of the room. No wonder he kept himself such a secret at the office. With an ass like that, he'd have interns camped outside his door from morning until night.

He returned shortly with his cell phone held to his ear and a cup, which he set down on the tray. A woman's voice told him clearly that she would call him back shortly with the information regarding the car order.

"Cab companies call you back now?" I asked after he hung up.

"No, but personal assistants do," he said with another impish half-smile. My gut clenched. "How's the tea?"

I took another sip. It was delicious, a sweet jasmine that I'd never had before. "Wonderful."

He nodded. "It's a blend I picked up the last time I was in Beijing. I'm no aficionado, thought it was pretty good." His phone buzzed in his hand. "Sterling."

The woman's voice was more muffled this time, so I couldn't understand what she was saying. "Really?" Sterling asked at one point. "All right. No, no, that's fine, Margie, I'll take care of it. You have a good night."

He ended the call and slid back down to his seat on the hearth, his elbows perched easily across his knees.

"Well, here's the deal, Ms. Crosby," he said.

"Skylar," I said. I didn't want him to stop saying it now that he'd started.

He rewarded me with another slow, soft smile that made my stomach flip. “Skylar. Well. It’s past one. The subways and busses are most likely done. Margie tells me she called four different car companies, but it appears that everyone in Boston is trying to get someone to drive them home in this weather. I’d drive you myself, but my car is being detailed while my driver’s on vacation. So, you’ve got a choice. You can wait here until about four A.M. for the next available car, which will make me fairly grumpy since I’ll have to stay up with you, and I’m dog-tired. You can take your chance with the T, in which case I’m happy to walk you to the station. But I seriously doubt you’ll do anything but spend the night there. Or you can take advantage of my hospitality and stay the night here in one of my guest rooms.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that,” I started to say, but received the same insistent flick of the hand that Ana had gotten.

“Stop,” Sterling ordered. “Really. This place is practically a hotel anyway. It’s no trouble, I promise.”

He lifted his eyebrow again in that way that dared me to argue otherwise, and I bit my lip as a snarky comment rose up my throat. His eyes zoomed straight to my mouth, and I quickly released my lip from my teeth.

“Ah,” he said, somewhat huskily this time. “So. Sleep on thousand-thread-count sheets in a warm bedroom. Or on a concrete bench with a bunch of homeless guys who probably haven’t showered since August. Tough decision, I know.”

I looked at him for a moment, trying to gauge if he was really as altruistic as he seemed. Or as confident. He was nice, for sure, but how many men invited a young woman to stay

the night without having ulterior motives? In my (admittedly limited) experience, approximately none.

“Do you, um, live here by yourself?” The question seemed fairly obvious; the place was silent as a tomb other than the sounds of crackling fire and our voices.

Sterling smirked.

“Yes,” he said. “Is that a problem?”

“Well, you’re not going to try anything, are you?” The question flew out before I could stop it.

“I’m pretty sure welcoming yourself into my house and wandering my halls removes any liability on my part of sexual harassment, Skylar,” he said with a grin. “But I applaud your contempt nonetheless. First I’ve seen that you could be as cutthroat as my associates tell me.”

“They talk about me?”

“They talk about everyone,” he said. “But yes, I’ve heard of you.” He looked up at the ceiling as though reciting the conversation from a file. “Quick with words, extremely competent, doesn’t take shit from any of the male interns. Smart. A lot of promise.” He looked sharply back to me. “Colletti said she wanted to recommend you for a junior associate position, but you weren’t actually interested in Mergers and Acquisitions. She said you didn’t seem interested in the part of being a lawyer that would allow you to make money. Is that true?”

I felt another flush rising up my neck and willfully blamed it on my tea. “I suppose so. I mean, I’d be happy to make some

coin, sir, but that's not why I'm in law school. I already went down that road once before, and it wasn't really for me."

"What road was that?"

"The making money for money's sake road. Before law school I spent some time working for Goldman Sachs. It was just before they took the big bailout. Seeing all those executives do that, take that money after stealing so much more from their investors and clients, all for the sake of padding their pocket books...it just made me sick. I'd rather be someone who could help people like that get some of it back. Or at least make sure they get what's theirs in the end."

Sterling raised a dusky eyebrow. "Almost sounds like you're interested in family law. Advocacy, things like that. But I've seen your transcripts; your grades are too good for that. You should be clerking for the Supreme Court, not mucking around at a litigation firm."

I shrugged. "I can't help if that's what I'm interested in. But I don't just want to do divorce work. Estate and trust work is interesting to me too—helping families and people decide what happens to their worth later on. But yes, I'd like to help some of the families who normally fall through the cracks get representation. Orphans or kids whose parents are incarcerated, for instance."

He tensed visibly. "Foster kids?"

I nodded. "For sure. Or abused women. Things like that."

"And why is that?"

I paused. I didn't want to tell him that I came close to being one of those orphaned kids myself—he wouldn't be

interested in that sob story, not that I told it much anyway. Finally, I answered him.

“I grew up in the city. I’ve seen enough of those types who need help. I’d like to be one of those people,” I replied shortly.

He didn’t answer me, just gazed thoughtfully from his seat across from me. I dug my toes into the rug and took another long swig of tea. When he stood up, he looked pointedly at my cup, now empty.

“So?” he asked. “It’s late. What’s it going to be, Skylar? Have a nice long sleep in one of my guestrooms? Or do you need some more tea to help you decide?”

His tone dared me to say no, but his eyes twinkled in a way that told me he was enjoying the give and take. I set my cup down on the tray next to him.

“All right,” I said. “You win.”

“I always do,” he replied with a grin. “Up one flight, second door down the hall on your right.”

“Aren’t you going to sleep too?” I asked, already standing up. I tried to stifle a yawn, but the thought of a warm bed was turning out to be more of a siren’s call than expected.

“I’ve got some more work to do tonight,” he said as he walked to the tea tray to fix himself a cup. “You have a good night, Skylar. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thank you, uh, Mr. Sterling,” I said, already on my way up the stairs. It felt strange to address him by his last name after he had removed my shoes, but he hadn’t instructed me otherwise. “Good night.”

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Chapter 4

Sterling was gone by the time I made my way downstairs after one of the best nights of sleep I'd had in a while. The bed had lived up to his promise and then some; the featherbed mattress really was cloudlike. The only place I felt more comfortable was in my attic bedroom in Brooklyn.

He (or Ana) had left out for me on the enormous kitchen island a small breakfast, which consisted of a cup of coffee, orange juice, and an unbelievably buttery croissant that was still warm. Next to the breakfast was a business card with the name "Brandon Sterling, CEO Sterling Corp." printed in bold letters, under which was an office number. On the back was a note in a broad, curt scrawl: "In case you need ride." I stared at the words for a moment, wishing that perhaps they meant more than their face value. Then I shoved the card into my purse and sat down to eat.

"Good morning, Skylar!"

Ana walked into the room carrying a large laundry basket full of the linens that were previously on my bed. She was dressed down again in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. I was somewhat happy to find that just because Sterling could afford to hire help didn't mean he made them dress like BBC characters.

I swallowed a bite of croissant and held up my coffee mug. "Morning. This was you?"

She set the basket on the floor just outside the steps leading to the basement and came to stand across the kitchen

island from me.

“Actually, no. This was there when I came up in the morning. You must have had good night, huh?” Ana pushed a hand into her bushy curls and winked, causing me to blush furiously.

“Ah, not exactly,” I stuttered, suddenly unable to meet her eyes.

“Skylar, relax, I’m joking. I know you were in the guest room. Those are your sheets, yes?” She tossed her head at the laundry, and I relaxed.

“Yes,” I confirmed. “*Yes.*” I swallowed the last of my croissant and washed it down with the orange juice, which was clearly fresh-squeezed. “Damn, that’s good. Does he usually get up this early?”

Ana nodded. “Yes, he is usually gone by six or so most days. I think that’s when he meets with his trainer. Sometimes he comes back around eight or nine for a bit to change.” She checked her watch. “If you want to stay another half an hour, you might catch him.”

“Ah, no, I should get going,” I replied. “I can’t believe he doesn’t have a live-in trainer along with his personal chef? How gauche!”

Ana laughed, flapping a delicate hand at me. “You’re bad. He’s nice, actually. As long as I keep things clean, he doesn’t give me problems. Only a few quirks.”

I leaned in curiously. “Quirks? Like what?”

She rolled her eyes and tapped a fingernail on the counter. “Nothing crazy, really. Like, the fireplace always has to be lit

if he's here at night, even in the middle of summer. Or, he always has me put a spare toothbrush in his bathroom next to his, even though it's never used. And there is a fridge that I have to keep stocked with five different types of cheap beer, but he never touches the stuff." She shrugged. "Quirks."

I frowned. "Other than the fireplace thing, those just sound like preparations for company. Does he have people over a lot?"

"Not the kind who drink bad beer. And not the kind who share his bathroom." She shrugged again, tipping her head to the side in thought. "Honestly...I think he just gets kind of lonely in this big house. Maybe it is these things make him feel like he has someone here with him."

I pondered that thought for a moment while she turned to put away some dishtowels and I finished the remainder of my juice.

"Not a coffee drinker?" Ana asked, gesturing toward the other cup still full of the dark black liquid.

I slid off my stool. "No, not really. I like tea better."

"How do you take it?" she asked. "You know, just in case I have to bring it out again."

I felt suddenly embarrassed at the idea of Ana serving me tea, serving me anything like that I could just get myself. I hoped Sterling paid her well. For her part, she didn't seem the slightest bit ashamed by her question, just stared at me expectantly.

"Ah, strong and sweet, with milk and a lot of honey," I said. "My favorite is Irish Breakfast. But I doubt you'll ever

have to use that information.”

Ana shrugged again. “You never know,” she teased in a sing-song voice. “Okay, I have to get to this laundry. You can let yourself out the front?”

I nodded as I slipped my arms into my coat. “No problem.”

“Okay. *Tchau*, Skylar!” She picked up the basket and sashayed down the stairs. It was no wonder Eric liked her—the girl managed to make carrying laundry look sexy.

A few minutes later I could hear the telltale noises of a washer echoing from below. That was my cue. After rinsing my dishes quickly in the sink, I left quickly and quietly after leaving a short note of thanks on the island, right next to the three other croissants I hadn’t touched.

~

I walked into my apartment just after nine to find my roommate, Jane, sitting cross-legged on our sofa as she thumbed through a textbook and marked occasional pages with sticky notes. She was surrounded by a well-worn copy of rules of criminal procedure, textbooks, yellow legal pads filled with her scrawl, and at least three empty coffee cups. She and I had been roommates since starting law school. Even though a lot of law students moved off campus or into the coveted single housing as they gained seniority, we had opted to continue rooming together on campus.

Jane was one of the only real girlfriends I’d ever had, since I didn’t come out of my shell in high school and missed out on most college social events by living at home. With the

utter ruthlessness that predetermined a successful career as a criminal prosecutor, she was my opposite in a lot of ways: outgoing where I was more withdrawn, raised in rural Illinois whereas I was a city girl through and through, extremely messy while I tended more toward order, a social butterfly compared to my hermit-like tendencies. But in other ways we had a great deal in common, including a direct streak that often veered more toward abrasive as well as a passion for honesty. She was loyal to a fault, and always had my back.

“Well, well, well,” she taunted me, slipping her cat-eyed reading glasses on top of her messy, black bob so she could give me the once-over. Half-Korean, Jane had thick, wavy black hair that was gloriously untamable and tended to riot around her face in the mornings until she tamed it with a lot of product. She wrinkled her button-shaped nose, which boasted a shining stud in one nostril. Her dark brown eyes twinkled. “And where did we spend the night last night, hmm, Miss Lady? Did you finally give into Steve the Goon’s advances?”

With a snort, I set my messenger bag on the small, round table that served double duty as a dining and study area, and began the process of pulling off my winter layers. I hung my parka, scarf, and hat on the small coat rack next to door and tossing my mittens into the basket below it. I slipped off my shoes and examined them briefly. Despite walking to and from the subway in the salty, slushy streets, the conditioning balm that Sterling had applied the night before had done its job and kept them free of any salt stains.

“God, no,” I finally answered Jane’s questions, walking into the kitchenette on the other side of the table. “Not with that Muppet. Never in a million, billion years. But you’d be

proud of me—I did dance with someone I met at a bar. And then spent the night with someone else.”

Jane set her book down on the couch with a thump and came to join me in the kitchenette while I rummaged around for a cup of tea, eager to warm my hands on a hot mug. She parked herself at the bar that split the small space from the rest of the small apartment, and stared at me resolutely.

“Dish,” she ordered, pointing a black-polished fingernail on the countertop. “Now.”

“The bar guy was lame. Kissed like a cold lizard. Investment douche, you know the type.” I quickly imitated the jerky motions of Trevor the banker’s tongue, which made Jane break into a loud peel of laughter.

“Oh, you poor girl!” she exclaimed. “You got tongue-fucked at Manny’s.”

“So I left early,” I continued as I finished pulling out the other requirements for my tea. “But I couldn’t find a cab in the snow, so I went to wait for a car with Eric and his...well, I guess you could say she’s his lady friend. We had a few drinks the three of us at her place, and the T wasn’t running, and I couldn’t find a cab, so I ended up having to stay there.”

“Ew, as a third wheel with Eric, the walking boner?” Jane scrunched her face up like a pug, a trademark expression that always made me laugh. “Doesn’t he have, like, four strains of VD?”

She and Eric had a notably love-hate relationship that stemmed from the one-night stand they’d had after orientation our first year. When it came to sexual exploits, they were in

many ways each other's doppelgängers. As a result, it was a constant argument between the two of them just what had happened that night and who had left whom. I had heard at least seven different renderings from each person.

“Ah, not exactly,” I said as I placed the now full kettle of water on the stove and turned it on. Jane moved back to the couch and waited patiently as I continued about my routine. She knew better than to push me to reveal stuff—I'd usually come around if she waited long enough. I studiously avoided her suspicious gaze, however, and it wasn't until I had poured us both mugs full of tea, doctored them up with milk and honey, and found a seat on the sofa next to her that I finally continued. She was patient, but she was also tenacious.

I relayed the rest of the story, from my mistake of wandering into the house above Ana's apartment, to seeing Sterling with the group of people, to being chased through the snow, the intimate shoe-polishing, and his eventual invitation to stay at his house.

“Wow, Sky,” Jane finally said at the end of my tale. “I think he might be in love with you, girl.”

I smirked. “Doubtful. He wasn't even there this morning when I woke up. I found Ana downstairs cleaning, and she gave me a cup of coffee and a croissant and sent me on my way. It was...awkward, to say the least.”

Jane, however, wouldn't be deterred.

“No way,” she said. “Rich guy like that? If he was really feeling altruistic, he would have just put you up at a hotel. I know there's plenty around the park. People like that don't

usually just invite strangers into their home.” She took a deep sip of her own tea and shook her head. “Definitely into you.”

I scratched my chin, considering. “I don’t know, Jane. I think maybe he’s just lonely. I mean, the place is huge. I only saw a few rooms in it, but there it’s at least six stories, maybe more. All for one person.”

“Didn’t he walk in with friends?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know who they were. I didn’t ask. They were laughing, but I got the feeling they were just colleagues or something from his office. He said they were done for the night when I came back to the house with him. There was this one chick who looked complete daggers at me, but he didn’t seem to notice.”

“Ah, so *she* wants *him*,” Jane concluded with satisfaction. “Is he hot?”

I shut my eyes for a moment, recalling the chiseled lines of Sterling’s face, the ridiculously bright blue eyes, the dark blond hair that was just a little too long, and the way his five o’clock shadow had lit up in the firelight.

“Wow,” Jane said, pulling me out of my momentary stupor. “That good, huh?”

I pulled my phone out of my skirt pocket and Googled him. Sure enough, several pictures popped up, mostly from the firm, but a few from Boston society pages. The other interns must have already done this—they were always twittering about getting a look at him. He was a benefactor of several organizations, I saw, including the Boston Symphony. I selected one of him in a tuxedo and held it out to Jane.

“Ooh,” she cooed at the photo. “Yeah, he’s a fuckin’ sundae, girl. You should get on that pronto. How old is he?”

I looked back at my phone. “Google says thirty-seven. Huh. For some reason I thought he was older.”

“Does Google tell you anything else about Daddy Warbucks?”

“Jesus Christ, Jane, *don’t* call him that. He’s already got eleven years on me.” I skimmed through his Wikipedia page, which stated his age and birthplace (also Boston) but revealed little else beyond his profession. For some reason I felt uncomfortable researching Sterling on the Internet; it felt too close to spying.

“Doesn’t look like it. Too bad.” I set the phone down on the coffee table and turned back to her. “Anyway, I don’t think it really matters. It would probably be a disappointment anyway.”

“Oh, come on, Sky, that’s just pessimistic.”

I avoided Jane’s look of pity by focusing on my cup of tea. This was a familiar conversation, and I wasn’t in the mood to get into it. Jane was always trying to get me involved with various men. Unlike me, she was one of those girls who seemed to have life-altering orgasms if a guy sneezed next to her, which was whenever she brought her flavor of the month back to the apartment. I had lived with Jane long enough to get somewhat used to her screams of ecstasy. She never understood why I generally found most of my own sexual encounters less than satisfying.

It wasn't that sex couldn't be fun, especially in the first few frantic encounters, when it was new and everyone got caught up in the will-we-or-won't-we of foreplay. But it hadn't escaped me that most men seemed to think my clitoris was about an inch from where they thought it was and that it deserved the same approximate touch as a light switch. When I did give in to the deed, I just ended up zoning out as the guy worked toward his own climax, operating under the assumption that the friction he created alone stimulated me as much as he did. If he was particularly demanding of my orgasm, I'd be forced to fake it. But most of my partners also didn't really care whether I got off or not, or at least thought it was my responsibility to make it happen if I did. After a while, it got easier and more fulfilling to get my kicks at home, where I didn't have to dress up and could make myself brunch the next morning anyway.

"How long has it even been?" Jane asked.

"Oh my god, Jane, don't start."

"No, seriously, hasn't it been, like, seven years or something like that?"

I rolled my eyes. "You are such a drama queen. It's only been six months."

Jane raised one eyebrow.

"Okay, eight," I admitted.

The brow only rose a bit more.

"Okay, fine, ten!" I relented as I threw a pillow at her, which she caught neatly and tucked behind her head.

"That's all I'm saying," she said with a satisfied smirk.

“Whatever,” I pronounced after I drained my cup. “I doubt I’ll ever see him again. I’m done at the firm at the end of the week, and then the semester begins. Which reminds me, I have a giant stack of depositions to get through before Monday.”

I stood up and brought my mug back to the kitchen, where I put the kettle on for another boil. While the water heated up, I went back to my bedroom to change out of MY work clothes and into a pair of old jeans and one of my dad’s old sweaters. Outside it had started to snow yet again. It was a good day to curl up on the couch with a hot drink and a good book. Or in my case, a bunch of court documents.

When I reemerged, Jane had already poured more tea for both of us and was sitting back on the sofa with her book.

“When you get to a good stopping point, we should probably head over to the bookstore and get our textbooks for next term,” she said. “It’s supposed to snow like this the rest of the day, and my professors have already sent out reading assignments.”

That meant mine had too. A full week before classes even started.

“Damn. No rest for the weary,” I said, settling next to her with my messenger bag and grabbing one of the depositions I still had to summarize. “I won’t have time to shop this week anyway, and I think I’m going to go down to New York next weekend before the term starts.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Jane said absently.

“I should probably get a thank you card too. You know, for Mr. Sterling.”

Jane looked up from her book and tipped her reading glasses down her nose so she could peer over them at me.

“I know how you could thank him,” she taunted. “Bring it up to his office, drop it on the floor and be all like, ‘Oh! Mr. Sterling, I’m sorry, let me get that for you! Oh my goodness, is that my ass I just backed into your hands? I’m soooo sorry!’”

She laughed as I kicked at her half-heartedly.

“That would be sexual harassment, Jane,” I informed her, even though I knew she was fully aware of the implications and impossibility of such an action. “Pretty sure it’s *not* office-appropriate.”

“Oh, whatever, you prude,” she joked, turning back to her book. “You know you want to. ‘What’s that, Mr. Sterling? My blouse just happened to fall open? Oh, no! I didn’t mean to shove my rack in your face!’”

“Jane!” The thing was, it was a little too easy to imagine myself into that fantasy, if a little less cartoonish. Laid across the big desk I imagined Sterling had. Him ripping off my shirt, buttons flying. I already knew what his big hands felt like on my feet...maybe they would drive a bit higher up... Mentally I shook that thought right out of my mind and bent to my work. The quicker I could get fantasies of Sterling out of my head, the better.

~

Typical of the weekend before classes began, the COOP was bustling with undergrads and grad students shoving their way around the tall stacks of books. With class lists in hand and plastic baskets over our wrists, Jane and I made our way to

the law section and started loading up on the textbooks assigned by our instructors.

“Fucking vultures,” Jane mumbled under her breath as she heaved a copy of *Constitutional Law* into her basket. “Did you see how much this cost? Two hundred motherfucking dollars!”

I shook my head and chuckled as I thumped an equally expensive family law textbook into my basket. We went through this exact routine at the beginning of every semester.

“Jane,” I said. “If you don’t want to pay Coop prices, why don’t you just buy them online?”

Like always, I was rewarded with a major eye roll in response.

“Oh, they’d like that, wouldn’t they?” she grumbled. “It’s the secret test of HLS, how they separate the shitty students from the good ones, you know. Only give us a week to order textbooks so that the ones who are willing to pony up retail prices can get ahead by reading early. Natural selection by way of student budgetary restrictions, the opportunistic bastards. Ooh! A used copy!” She snagged another book, this one well worn, and turned to me a wide parody of a smile. “Look, Ma, I saved ten bucks on a two-hundred-dollar textbook!” With an immediate frown, she dropped the book on top of the other in her cart.

“At least they only assign one or two books,” I said as a meager attempt to comfort. “It’s not like we have to spend two thousand dollars on textbooks or anything.”

“Yeah, but you forgot to factor in the readers.” A male baritone interrupted our exchange from behind me, startling

both Jane and me. We glanced around to find one of our classmates, Jared Rounsaville, standing behind us as he perused the books we were complaining about it.

“Hey Jared,” I greeted him. Jane raised a hand, but went back to grabbing books while muttering further obscenities at the stacks. It seemed her Advanced Criminal Procedures course was a particularly expensive one this semester.

“Hey Skylar,” Jared said, sidling up to me. “Have a good break?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I did that internship at Sterling Grove. You?”

He whistled at my accomplishment.

“Nah, I just went home,” he said. “I had a clinic last semester, so I figured I was good on the experience stuff.”

Jared was the typical Harvard legacy student. He was smart, but it was hard to tell how much of that intelligence was breeding, and how much as innate talent. I didn't know him well, but I knew that his dad and grandfather had both attended HLS and that his dad was a sitting congressman. He had a position waiting for him at his grandfather's firm, so he had no real need to pursue extra work experience or contacts. With his straight, light brown hair and pin-straight nose, his looks were about as WASPish as it got, further enhanced by pressed chino pants and a blue Polo shirt. His smile, however, was genuine, and his full lips and broad build made him a common target among a lot of the girls in our classes. Even in law school, a few of the girls were only there to get their MRS degrees.

“So I’m pretty psyched,” he said as the three of us made our way back through the bookstore toward the registers. “I managed to score tickets to one of The Starfoxes shows next week. They’ve been sold out for a while, but my cousin was able to hook me up.”

Next to me, Jane rolled her eyes—she hated what she called “privileged white people music,” which was usually anything that was on regular rotation at Starbucks. It didn’t matter that she was the daughter of a privileged white person herself, which I often teased her about, despite agreeing with her anyway. She would just shout one of the few vulgar Korean terms she’d picked up from her cousins on her mother’s side and throw the nearest soft object at me.

“That’s nice,” I said neutrally as we stepped into line, Jared in front of where Jane and I stood side by side. The line wound around several stacks of health and lifestyle books, but luckily it was moving quickly. “I’m sure you’ll have a good time.”

“It would be better if you took the other ticket.” Just before he turned around for my answer, Jane’s eyes shot open extremely wide at me before she brought them back to an even, neutrally curious expression.

I blinked. I hardly knew Jared, and hadn’t really interacted with him much socially since we were both in the same study group during first year. He was cute, but I had just told Jane I thought dating was a waste of time. Not to mention I didn’t really like The Starfoxes anymore than she did. My own tastes in music tended to run toward classical, having double-majored in music as an undergraduate. I was pretty open to

different styles, but whiny, pseudo-folk music wasn't really on my radar.

"Um..." I said, trying unsuccessfully to stall. "You know, I'm going home next weekend, so I can't." I breathed out. It was actually a good excuse, and one that was mostly true.

Jared nodded affably. "Okay. Another time, then."

The line moved up and one of the cashiers flagged him forward to her stall. Beside me, Jane grabbed my arm and jerked me around to face her.

"You should go out with him," she said.

"But I *am* actually going home," I told her. "And I don't even like that band."

"Oh, no, that band sucks balls, big time," she said. "They're the musical equivalent of IHOP. But another time, I mean. You should definitely hit that."

Another cashier waved me forward, and Jane followed with her own basket. The cashier frowned, but said nothing as she started to ring me up.

"You don't even like guys like that," I pointed out. "He's so preppy. My dad doesn't even wear pants that pressed."

"Whatever. Your dad doesn't even know what an iron is," She retorted. "And that doesn't mean he wouldn't be good for you. He's nice. Not just for hump 'em and dump 'em. He's the kind of guy you might actually date because he won't fuck you over. And you deserve nice after that last train wreck."

"Four-ninety-two, eight-seven," the cashier proclaimed, now watching us with obvious interest. I ignored her and

handed over my credit card while addressed Jane.

“I do *not* want to talk about *him*,” I said vehemently. With eyebrows raised, the cashier handed me my card and receipt, which I signed with more flourish than normal while Jane placed her books on the counter with a bright smile.

When I first started at HLS, I was still dating Patrick Harlow, otherwise known as the world’s second worst person after Robbie. Patrick was certified asshole investment banker I had met at Goldman. We had dated for almost a year before I quit that job, and continued seeing each other on weekends for another year before I discovered he was cheating on me by way of a surprise bout of Chlamydia. When I confronted him about it, he shrugged and told me he was “sorry about the clap, but we had never decided to be exclusive.” I had slapped him in the face and gone straight to the pharmacy. Ten weeks of antibiotics cleared up the STD, but I had never quite healed from the damage he had done to my heart.

Jared was waiting by the door for Jane and me when we finished paying for our books. I caught his eye, and he waved and stepped out of the way of the other students to continue waiting. With his toggle-front parka and nicely combed hair, he looked the very definition of safe. It had become extremely clear over the past year and a half that one-night stands weren’t my thing. It had certainly occurred to me that maybe my general unexceptional experience with sex had more to do with the fact that I had yet to find a partner who actually cared about me. Patrick hadn’t given a shit, that was for sure. And, despite the way a certain tall, blond god kept creeping into my thoughts, there really weren’t any other prospects on the

immediate horizon. I would be lying if I said I wasn't interested in, well, *someone*.

Maybe the key wasn't chemistry, but intimacy. Jared and I were sort of friends. Maybe I needed to start there.

Jared stood to the side, opening the door in a way that demonstrated just how good his manners really were.

"Thanks," I said as Jane and I stepped out into the snow-covered street with him. "So, I can't go to the show next weekend, but would you want to go out another time?"

Jane was barely able to contain the boomerang-like double take and obvious grin, so she scampered down a few steps ahead of us to offer some privacy.

Jared looked down and smiled brightly. "Yeah," he said. "I would. Do you still have my information from study group?"

I nodded. "Yeah, it's in my Contacts. I'll call you when I get back from New York. Maybe after we settle into classes, okay?"

He smiled again and nodded. "Sounds good. I'll see you around, Skylar."

With a brief wave, he turned down a side street leading off Harvard Square. I watched his tall, confident form for a moment before turning back to Jane, who was practically jumping up and down on the sidewalk next to me.

"Don't. Say. Anything," I warned her, but we both grinned as we started to make our way back across the snowy campus to the warmth of our apartment.

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Chapter 5

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the other castaway! Lemme guess, you and Eric were up to no good, huh?”

Steve greeted me with uncomfortably loud hoots and hollers as I walked to my desk on Monday morning. Like most of the other interns and junior associates, I made a point to be at least ten minutes. It was seven-forty-five. None of the senior associates would be in to brief us for another fifteen minutes.

I dropped my messenger on my desk, took off my parka, and sat down to remove my snow boots, which were laced up to my knees over my carefully folded pants. The blizzard that had coated Boston with another two feet over the weekend had let up late last night, but made snow boots and thick coats requirements on the commute to work. Shearling boots over wool cigarette slacks wasn’t the best look, but I wasn’t alone in my style in a city like Boston. Besides, my ankle-length parka hid the worst of the fashion faux pas.

Reluctantly, I slid my toes into the cheap black pumps I kept in my desk for days like this. My boots were ugly, but at least they didn’t pinch my toes. I dearly missed my Manolos, but they were now at the cobbler, being treated for the salt stains that had persisted despite Sterling’s careful treatment.

Just the thought of his hands on my feet made me shiver in spite of the overly heated office. The sad truth was that I hadn’t been able to get the encounter out of my head no matter how many briefs I’d read over the weekend. I doubted he had been as affected, but I had never known the brief touch of

someone's hands—large, slightly callused hands—on my toes could be so erotic. God, and the way he worked those pants...

“So how was he, counselor? As good as he looked? Or at least the way his overpriced suit looked?”

I snapped my head up out of my daydream. “Who?”

God, could he know?

“You know, the investment ass that you were chatting up at the bar. Cherie and I saw him follow you out. What was his name? Rico Suave? Was his apartment massive and full of high tech gadgets?”

Steve wagged his eyebrows jokingly, but I could hear the note of hurt in his voice. He was the kind of guy who would comment on another man's expensive suit precisely because he couldn't afford it. He was from a middle-class town in Long Island and was putting himself through law school with a combination of expensive private loans and a lot of hours as a waiter. Most of his suits were purchased consignment and were at least ten years out of style, but it would probably be another fifteen years more before he could afford decent ones.

I rolled my eyes as I stood up to hang my parka, hat, and scarf. “A, his name was Trevor, not the name of a shitty one-hit-wonder. B, I have no idea, as I went home after leaving the bar. And C, *counselor*, even if I did, it would be none of your damn business. Don't ask women you hardly know about their sex lives!”

Steven frowned and rubbed his face with a “Touchy!” under his breath as he sank back into his cubicle. I smoothed the lines of my favorite suit as I sat back in my desk chair.

It wasn't exactly a secret that Steve had wanted to be the one to take me home on Friday night, and I felt a pang of guilt at his insinuation that the reason why was because of his background. I had felt that kind of classism myself more than a few times at Harvard once people found out that I was the daughter of a garbage collector.

"I couldn't bring a guy like that home anyway," I said more generously. I pointed at myself with my thumb. "Daughter of a city employee. Trust fund brats need not apply."

In return I got a wide grin and a wink. "Ha! Good for you, Crosby," Steve chortled before ducking back down into his cubicle, dignity intact.

Despite my lack of stylish footwear, it hadn't escaped me that I had put in slightly more effort than usual getting ready for work that morning. I had just 'happened' to wake up an extra fifteen minutes earlier than normal, and just 'decided' on a whim to straighten my wayward red waves down my back instead of tucking them into a practical bun. I was wearing my favorite gray herringbone suit that I had bought in Paris while studying abroad, a crisp, ironed white shirt, and emerald studs that made my green eyes stand out. The cut of the ankle-skimming pants flattered my swimmer's legs and the matching jacket cut expertly around my waist in a trim, yet professional hourglass shape that was infinitely more stylish than the usual cheap suits interns wore.

Deep down, I knew what it was for. Or whom. Though it was extremely unlikely that I would run into a certain devastatingly handsome boss of mine, I couldn't help but

daydream a little in between the reading assignments about what might happen if, say, I ran into him in the elevator. Where he might shove me against the wall. And kiss me. And maybe rip the buttons off my jacket as he tore it from my heaving body.

Okay, so I hadn't spent the rest of my weekend daydreaming about Jared. Not even close.

"I heard you met Sterling."

Eric's voice shook me out of my daydream, and I swiveled around on my chair to see him shaking snow off his parka. He hung it over the side of his cubicle and sat down in his own desk chair, facing me as he leaned over to clean off his shoes. I scooted over to him so I we could speak in hushed tones without anyone else overhearing us.

"Hey, be quiet," I said. "I'd rather the peanut gallery next door didn't find out I ditched everyone to gallivant all night with our boss."

"Gallivant, huh? And all night? Damn, Crosby, you must have some serious game. Not to mention stamina," Eric teased.

I kicked ineffectively toward his chair. "You know very well that is *not* what happened. I'm sure Ana filled you in."

Eric shrugged and gave me a sly grin. "All she knows was that you ate breakfast there in the morning. Somebody helped you work up an appetite, huh?" He started grooving in his seat to self-made porn music sounds, which earned him another kick. "Okay, okay!" he stopped, stifling chuckles. "She might have also mentioned that you slept in the guest room, right?"

“*Right,*” I hissed. “Did you know that was his place? Tell me the truth.”

Eric shrugged. “Sure. Probably.”

“‘Just some rich guy.’ Right. And you didn’t think to tell me that before I went wandering around our reclusive boss’s personal home?” I leaned back in my chair and shoved my hands through my hair, mortified all over again by the memory of being caught sitting in the window, all Little Miss Muffet on my very own damn tuffet.

Eric smiled that devious grin that I knew had caught multiple other students’ fancies over the years; strangely, it had no effect on me. We were both from New York, albeit completely different parts. Eric had grown up in a classic six on the Upper East Side and attended some of the best private schools in Manhattan, which was a far cry from my family’s shabby house in Brooklyn. Still, the carefree demeanor with which he approached women reminded me of the boys who hung out on the steps in my old neighborhood, jeering casually at women as they walked by. If they didn’t know you, you weren’t much more than a piece of meat to them; if they did, you were practically like a sister. Apparently to him I was the latter.

I stuck my tongue out, and he laughed.

“Hey, Crosby, no one told you to start playing Goldilocks up there. Besides, you wouldn’t have come if you knew,” he said simply. “And Ana wouldn’t have let me stay unless you did.”

“You are so gross,” I informed him.

“Yeah, but you love me anyway.”

He winked and grabbed the coffee canister he had set on the desk when he arrived. He pulled a Dixie cup out of his desk drawer and poured a small cup, which immediately filled the air with its aroma. Eric was an unbelievable snob when it came to coffee, claimed that the stuff the firm provided was basically battery acid. He came in every morning with a thermos full of some locally roasted, French-pressed coffee.

“Anyway, of course I wouldn’t have come,” I said as I watched him doctor his coffee. “It’s the freaking name partner’s house! And I was just wandering around the first floor like some drunk college kid!”

Eric chuckled. “Yeah, that’s pretty classic. You sure you only stayed in your own room? Or maybe you wandered up a few stories...”

“Oh my God, *no!*” I hissed. “And I said keep your voice down! I slept in the guest room, like you said. And he was gone by the time I got up. Nothing interesting happened besides me embarrassing myself, thank you very much. He chased me down the street after I ran out of there like a banshee. Then he polished my shoes for me before putting me up in his guest bedroom, probably more out of guilt than anything else.”

“Jesus Christ, Crosby. Only you would turn a potentially priceless networking opportunity into a way to use the most powerful attorney in Boston as a shoe shine boy.” Eric shook his head, with an expression that was equal parts grimace and smirk.

“Yeah, because that would have been super classy,” I replied, shoving my toe into a piece of loose carpeting by my desk. “Hey, Mr. Sterling, now that I’ve trespassed on your property, would you mind giving me, some strange girl whom you couldn’t care less about, a huge advantage in my career prospects despite the fact I’ve already turned down a job at your company?’ I’m sure that would have gone over really well.”

Eric pursed his lip thoughtfully, inhaling deeply into his coffee before taking a sip. “I hate to tell you this, Crosby, but guys aren’t just naturally chivalrous—not these days. Ana said he made you breakfast. Doesn’t sound like a guy who doesn’t care to me.”

I shook my head fervently. “He wasn’t even there in the morning. I doubt he even remembers who I am.”

My vehemence was rewarded by another chuckle from Eric, but our conversation was halted as Ben, one of the junior associates working on the trial, wheeled a dolly carrying five cardboard boxes into the room, a smaller box perched on top of the others.

“I come bearing gifts of farewell!” he called out. “Depositions to summarize! The Walker trial continuance got denied.”

Everyone groaned, though it was all in good fun. Our trial might be over, but we were being paid through the week, and there was always more work to be done. By this point, we were all used to going through depositions with a fine-toothed comb. Ben explained the case theory and indicated the dates and a few terms he wanted highlighted, along with a few other

things he wanted noted and marked in the files, and began to disperse the files to each of the interns' cubicles.

“Skylar,” he said as he handed me two of the large bound files and a rectangular box wrapped in unremarkable brown paper. Only my name was marked across the top in curt black print. “Looks like you got an admirer from upstairs. Before you start on these, you’re wanted up on the sixth floor.”

I furrowed my brow, ignoring the immediate clenching of my gut. The sixth floor was the partners’ floor. “Did they say with whom?”

Ben shook his head. “No, just got the call a minute ago. Get going.”

He continued around the room with his files, leaving me to face Eric, who was grinning.

“Well, let’s see what Santa brought, Cros,” he said, leaning eagerly over my mystery box.

I snatched a letter opener off my desk and tore open the package. Under the anonymous wrapping was an equally blasé white box with “Manolo Blahnik” emblazoned quietly on one side. I lifted the top and pulled out a note that read simply:

Thought you should have a backup. B.

I folded the note closed and set it on the desk, turning back to the box. Beneath a layer of tissue paper, I found a pair of deep red, size-six leather pumps with pointed toes and delicate stiletto heels. They were gorgeous. And perfect. And completely inappropriate.

I was interrupted from my thoughts by a low whistle. Next to me, Eric held up his paper coffee cup in a mock-toast.

“Well, well, well, Cinderella,” he said with a smirk. “Looks like Prince Charming came with both shoes this time.”

~

The elevators opened into a central reception desk that matched the lobby on the first floor of the large building that housed Sterling Grove. The heather-gray, tufted couches and chairs that decorated the lobby coordinated with dark wood floors, both complementing the 19th-century building’s original interior while lending a stylish air. The receptionist, a young woman with blonde hair and oddly tanned skin for this time of year in New England, looked up from her computer when the elevator bell signaled my arrival.

“Can I help you?” she asked in a tone reeking of irritation as she perused me up and down. So much for a welcome reception.

I pushed my shoulders back and approached the desk, my impromptu gift cradled under one arm. “Hi, I’m Skylar Crosby, one of the interns downstairs. Ben said I was wanted by one of the partners, but he didn’t say who it was.” I knew exactly who it was, of course, but she didn’t need to know that.

The receptionist surveyed me with a raised brow, as if she didn’t quite believe me. “Hold on a moment,” she said, and picked up her phone. “Hey, Reese. Can you ask if anyone back there sent for an intern? Skylar Cosby?”

“Crosby,” I corrected her.

She rolled her eyes and said my name again, this time correctly. “I know, right?” she said into the phone with a smirk

at me. “Just check anyway. Thanks, Reese.” She set down the phone and looked pointedly at the couches in front of the reception area. “Someone will be right with you.”

I gave her a tight smile and took a seat in a small arm chair to wait. Within a few minutes, the phone rang again.

“Hey Reese,” said the receptionist. “Really? Okay, I’ll send her back.” After hanging up, she looked over to me. “Mr. Sterling’s office is to the right, all the way at the end of the hall.”

She buzzed open the door behind her, and I walked through with only a tight nod her way.

I followed a very long hallway to the back of the building, my footsteps muted by the plush gray carpet beneath them. Most of the doors were open, revealing paralegals and assistants working at their own small desks that guarded offices of actual partners. It was a huge firm, so I wasn’t surprised by just how many of these nested offices there were on my way to the largest one at the end of the hall. I walked through the open door marked Sterling, where an older woman with graying brown hair typed furiously as she listened to a digital recording through one ear bud. She looked up as I approached her desk.

“Ms. Crosby?” she asked as she stopped whatever she was listening to.

“Yes. Are you Reese?”

She snorted. “Hardly. Reese is one of the junior partners’ assistants—she’s just friends with Alexis, the receptionist. My name is Margie. You can go right in. He’s expecting you.”

She replaced her earbud and pressed her foot down to continue the recording, and paid me no more attention as I approached the office door behind her and opened it.

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Chapter 6

It was easily the biggest office I had ever seen. Like the kitchen at his home, it was bigger than my entire apartment. The first part of room had the makings of a typical, if luxurious office space: Immediately there were the makings of a typical, if cozy office. A massive antique desk that had woodwork similar to the style of the Resolute Desk stood to my immediate right, faced by two overstuffed armchairs, behind which was a four-person antique table and chair set and several dark-wood bookshelves carrying files, binders, and, of course, books. His back to the wall, Sterling sat at the carved behemoth like a king, more than resembling a young JFK as he thumbed through the papers scattered in front of him. The wall behind him was hung with various accolades: several trial lawyer of the year awards, what looked like a letter from the mayor or the governor, and three framed magazine covers featuring his handsome face. It was a set up that was both comfortable and intimidating—likely by design.

Beyond these pieces, however, the room opened up to what looked like a small apartment, including a kitchenette in the far corner, an open door revealing the corner of a bed, and a plush navy couch facing a brick fireplace. Small flames blazed merrily. At the far end of the room, several large windows allowed streams of bright light into the otherwise dark room, painted as it was in a deep, ocean-blue that heightened the colonial feel of the dark wood molding and wainscoting bordering the walls. Most of downtown Boston was visible through the windows, including a bit of the

Commons. Snow was starting to fall again outside, making the fire all the more welcoming.

I stepped further into the room, and Sterling looked up at the sound of the door slamming shut behind me. His smile was so instantaneous and bright that I had to grab the doorknob behind me when my legs stopped working momentarily. How had I forgotten just how handsome this man was? He still had that same ruddy complexion, the same slightly too-long, dark blond hair that was combed back and curling slightly around his ears. I didn't normally care for the slicked back look, thinking it a bit too gangster for my tastes, but he made it work, mostly because it was clear he did it out of expediency and not for looks. All in all, he looked positively leonine.

"Skylar," he said, standing up to reveal a boxer's body: shoulders and neck almost too broad for a crisp blue shirt the color of a summer sky. A simple black tie fell to his trim, tapered waist. His black jacket was draped over the back of his chair, but it was clear that the man looked good enough in a suit to eat. "Come on in."

"Hello, Mr. Sterling," I said as I walked to stand in front of his desk.

Uncertain if I should sit down, I remained standing as he stared at me for a moment without speaking. He continued to stare, still smiling, while I felt increasingly uncomfortable

"You sent for me, Mr. Sterling?" I reminded him.

Interrupted, he shook his head, grinning again. "Sorry, just caught in a daydream. I was just about to make some tea. Would you like some?"

“Ah, sure.”

I followed Sterling to the back of the room, where he gestured I should take a seat on the couch while he moved to the kitchen to fix our tea. The heels of my cheap pumps sank into the thick Aubusson carpet laid in front of the hearth. My cheeks reddened as I recalled the last time I was sitting in front of a fire with this man, my feet cradled delicately in his large hands.

“Is the fire too hot?” he asked as he sat down next to me and handed me a cup of hot tea. He also set a small file beside him on the cushion. “Your face is a bit red.”

Sterling glanced down at the box I had set beside me and frowned. I had to brace myself not to start when I caught the expression on his face. The friendly smile was completely gone, replaced with a thick scowl. He was clearly not someone you wanted to be mad at you.

“No, no, the fire is fine,” I said, pulling his attention from the gift I obviously meant to return. “Perfect for a day like this. A bit unusual for an office, though.”

“This building used to be full of tenement apartments from the nineteenth century,” he said, quickly reverting to his easy demeanor as he sat back into the massive couch cushions. “We tore out most of them when we bought the building, but we kept parts of it in my office. Makes it nicer to be here considering it’s practically my second home. That’s actually a bedroom in the back.”

I tried and failed not to imagine him in bed, and took a sip of tea to avoid looking at him, willing my skin not to flush. The tea was just the way I liked it: strong with a bit of cream

and honey. Strange, I thought, that we liked our tea the same way. Then I glanced over and saw that his was black.

“How did you know how I like my tea?” I asked with a frown.

He smiled again, that same Cheshire cat smile he had given me at his apartment that convinced me to stay the night. I wondered how often he got his way with that smile.

“Oh, I found out quite a bit about you since Friday, Skylar.” He put his tea down on the side table and flipped open the slim file he’d brought with him.

“Skylar Ellen Crosby,” he recited. “Born April 8th, 1989, in Brooklyn, New York. Daughter of Daniel Crosby, city sanitation employee, and Janette Barrett, housewife. Parents divorced, mother remarried to Maurice Jadot of Paris, deputy CEO with BNP Paribas.” He stopped, shooting me a quick, blue look. “Guy’s a shark. Hope he’s nicer at home.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I bit out, trying and failing to keep the bitterness from my voice.

I could count the number of times I’d seen my mother in the last fifteen years on one hand, and I’d only met Maurice once. Christmas cards had informed me that they had two kids together, Annabelle and Christoph, ages eight and six. They lived outside of Paris in a house—if you could call the massive chateau that—I had hoped to see when I had studied abroad there for a year and a half in college. I’d never been invited.

You could say it was a sore subject.

Sterling cleared his throat and continued. “High School valedictorian P.S. 117, doubled majored in Business Finance

and...Music?" He glanced at me curiously. "Minored in Francophone Studies at NYU, where you graduated summa cum laude. Top-earning junior analyst at Goldman Sachs before receiving a partial scholarship to Harvard Law. Lives in student housing, I see—I went to HLS too, so I know the address. Speaks French fluently. Conversational German and...Yiddish, huh?"

I took another sip of my tea before replying. At this point I wasn't sure what this was—a job interview or an invitation to tea. I hadn't asked for either one. "Jewish grandmother. So you know my resume and probably the contents of the background check I know your company does on its employees. Doesn't explain how you know my preference for tea though."

He smirked, clearly enjoying whatever little game we were playing. The problem was, I wasn't much good at these kinds of games.

"Ana might have mentioned how you liked it. She's a good spy." His smile morphed back into a frown as his glance once again fell on the shoebox. "Why is that here?" he asked sharply.

I set my tea on the small side table next to me and picked up the box, which I offered to him. He stared down at it for a moment, then back at me with obvious irritation, but didn't move to take it.

"What?" I asked. I set the box on the couch between us and pushed it toward him. "This is an incredibly ostentatious gift, and I work for you. It would be completely inappropriate for me to take it."

"It's a pair of shoes," he stated.

“That cost a month’s rent.”

“Are you planning to continue working for me?” he asked.

I paused. “No. Am I being offered a job again?”

“No,” he echoed. He leaned toward me, and I had to force myself not to lean back. “Not unless you’ve changed your mind.”

I bit my lip. I was all but being told that a job offer at one of the top firms in the city was imminent with my acceptance. Every law student in Boston would be falling over themselves for this kind of opportunity, particularly in this job market, particularly with only one semester to go. But my instincts hadn’t changed, and Sterling Grove wasn’t the right place for me—especially if I was going to be working for someone with a penchant for over-the-top gifts that would do nothing but start a bunch of unpleasant rumors.

“I haven’t changed my mind,” I said much more confidently than I felt. “But that doesn’t mean I can take these from you.”

“Sure it does.”

“No, it doesn’t!” I sputtered.

I picked up the box and thrust it into his lap; it slid helplessly to the floor. The sleek red shoes clattered out of the cardboard to rest harmlessly on the rug. Sterling glared at me, his eyes now a dark blue despite the warm light. This time I glared right back.

We stared at each other silently while the fire popped in front of us. I tried not to notice that his knee was touching mine, sending heat coursing up my leg that couldn’t

completely be from the fire or the obvious frustration we both felt. They did say there was a thin line between love and hate. It was all too easy to imagine us throwing the shoes across the room—maybe at each other?—before falling onto that soft rug. Naked. Wrestling. He would lean over me in the firelight and pin my hands over my head just as he eased himself between my...

“Skylar?”

I blinked out of my illicit daydream. “What?” Christ, that had gone from zero to sixty in record time.

His scowl had transformed into a knowing half-grin that told me he knew exactly what I was thinking about. “Your cheeks are red again. Are you feeling all right?”

Goddamn my Irish complexion. God had it out for red heads, that’s for sure.

“I’m fine,” I said, reaching for my tea again. I made a big production of taking a sip, rotating the cup in the saucer, and setting it back down again so I could regain my composure. “Just a bit annoyed, if you want to know the truth. Are you always this stubborn?”

“As an ass,” he confirmed. With one toe, he kicked the shoes out of sight. “Usually gets me what I want.”

Something about the way he said that had me flushed all over again, and I found myself reaching for my tea again just to avoid the heat of his gaze. I took another large sip and a deep breath. When I felt calm again, I looked up.

“Mr. Sterling, why am I here? Somehow I don’t think it was just to enjoy a cup of tea or argue about shoes.”

He sat back into the couch again. “Haven’t I told you yet to call me by my first name?”

I shook my head. I would have remembered that.

“It’s Brandon,” he said. “You should call me Brandon. Especially since I asked you up here because I’d really like to fuck you. Tonight, if that works.”

I nearly dropped the cup I was holding. I sat there staring at him, completely dumbfounded to the point where I wasn’t actually sure he had said what he said. I must have imagined that. Was he that stupid? Making sexual advances on an intern? At work? In his *office*?

“Let me be clear that this is in no way work related, and considering that you have already turned down a possible job offer from my firm, I do not expect this can be constituted as sexual harassment in any way. Are we clear?”

It was as if he had read my mind. This was a huge gamble, and he knew it. The safer move would have been to wait until I was officially no longer an employee of his company. Even then I could probably cry foul, say I was blackmailed by his status in the legal community. But...he hadn’t. Maybe because he knew what I was feeling. Maybe, a small, internal voice rang out, because he felt the same way too.

“Ah, I suppose we are,” I said, finally finding my actual voice again. “You’re not going to jump me here, are you?”
Please jump me.

He leaned back and laughed from his gut. “God, no, Red. Sorry, but no. Although it’s a soft rug...”

Briefly I wondered if he had ESP. He set the file containing my resume aside and scooted closer to me so that our legs were now flush together. I could smell his nascent odor of soap, laundry detergent, and some unique scent that belonged just to him—something vaguely metallic mixed with almonds. It smelled...unique. And disturbingly good.

We were close enough that I could see the small creases at the edges of his eyes and a few frown lines across his forehead—the first obvious signs of our age difference. It was a fact that should have deterred me, but seemed completely inconsequential at the moment. His cheeks already had a tiny bit of delectable stubble growing, suggesting he shaved at night, rather than the morning. His lips were fuller than I had originally thought—soft and ripe enough that I wanted to suck the bottom one into my mouth.

“Seriously, though,” he said, pulling me from my observations. His voice was suddenly serious, and he watched me carefully as he spoke, his eyes vast, watchful pools of blue. “It’s a cliché, I know...but since Friday, I...I can’t stop thinking about...”

He trailed off as he reached a tentative finger out to touch the curve of my jaw. He traced down to my chin and up to rest on my lower lip, which I realized was tucked firmly in between my teeth. I looked back up to his eyes, which were now almost dark as the night sky, pupils dilated with lust.

I released my lip and pulled away a fraction, but not much since he had already pushed me into the corner of the couch. He must have seen an expression of cornered prey on my face,

because quickly his hand dropped to his lap, much to my instinctual regret. He cleared his throat.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m putting the cart before the horse.”

He stood up and walked over to the fire, where he poked at it before turning back to me and sitting on the edge of the small hearth.

“You’re a law student,” he said. “Motivated. Busy. I don’t know why you don’t have a job yet, but I’m guessing Sterling Grove isn’t the first place to court you. Since you haven’t taken a job, I’d bet my stock portfolio you’ll be spending most of the next semester networking along with your regular classes, clinic, maybe some other extracurriculars. Am I right?”

He rested his hands on his knees and leaned forward, causing one lock of thick blond hair to fall forward onto his forehead before he pushed it back with one hand. I finished my tea and kept the now-empty cup in my hands, if only to keep them from shaking. I didn’t know whether I should slap him, sue him, or jump him. I was so completely out of my league.

“Um, yes,” I replied slowly. “But—so what?”

“You’re direct,” he observed. “That’ll make this easier. My point is, I sympathize with your busy life. I’m a founding partner of a top twenty law firm and the CEO of Sterling Ventures. My jobs are very, very demanding of my time.”

I stared at him, waiting.

“When was the last time you went on a date, Skylar?”

I frowned at the sudden change of subject as he took a seat close to me on the couch again and smiled that feline smile that was starting to become unnervingly familiar. One big arm slid around the back of the couch behind my back, the other crossing my lap to rest a hand on the couch arm, effectively caging me with his body.

“I—I don’t understand,” I stammered. “Do you want to date me or sleep with me? Because they’re not the same thing.”

“No, they’re not. I’m glad you know the difference,” he said dryly. “I think it’s clear that neither of us have any time for that kind of nonsense.”

“Nonsense?”

“Drama. Attachment. All of it takes too much time. But it’s clear that this...whatever this is...isn’t going away. So, the best thing to do is probably to nip it in the bud, don’t you think?”

“You want to—” I could bring myself to say the word “fuck” in the middle of my boss’s office. “—you know...it out of our systems?” I twisted around to set my cup on the side table, unable to hold it steady any more. I was finding it hard to breathe properly.

“I’d probably use a different word, but yeah. Pretty much.”

I exhaled out a long, slow sigh—of relief or disappointment, I wasn’t sure.

“You get this really cute crease on your chin when you frown, Red,” he said, releasing the cage of his arms to touch the tender spot just below my lower lip.

He traced his hand down my back, causing me to arch indelicately against his chest. His lips moved over my cheekbones, and I found myself leaning into him without consciously having decided to do so. He rightfully assumed I was giving him the green light to move his hands up the sides of my waist until his thumbs grazed beneath my breasts. What might he be able to do when there wasn't anything impeding his touch?

“It could be amazing, you know,” he murmured into my ear, the rumble of his deep voice causing every hair on the back of my neck to stand up in want. “Fucking unbelievable. You know it just as well as I do. Look at what just my simple touch does to you.”

“When?” I murmured, half hoping he would say “now” after all and continue his onslaught underneath the fabric of my jacket instead of teasing me over it. Instead he sat back again, and crossed his arms against his broad chest, considering the question. I practically wilted in the absence of his touch.

“You’ll come over Friday nights, always. A standing appointment of sorts. Every other Saturday as long as my schedule permits, and that may include attending the occasional dinner meeting or benefit as my date. You’ll have an allowance for whatever clothes and salon services you need. You’ll benefit too—the contacts alone from these things will make your career in whatever field of law you want. And we’ll both get what we need badly. No strings. No sleepovers. Nothing to get in the way of both of our very busy lives. You can stay in the guest room or my driver will take you home right away.” He shrugged. “The choice is up to you. If things

progress further, I'll get you an apartment near campus, a car, whatever you need. The idea is to make this as convenient as possible."

My eyes popped open as he spoke, the haze of his touch wearing off quickly with every distinctly unromantic phrase. Apartment. Convenience. These things might sound better if there was even an iota of the kind, thoughtful man I'd met that first night, but that man wasn't anywhere in this room. As for this guy, there was a word for what he was asking for.

"You want me to be your mistress." It was not a question. In the harsh light of clarity, what I saw was not good.

"Well, no," Sterling said uneasily, his confident façade visibly fading. "You can't be a mistress if I'm not with anyone else."

"But you essentially want me to be your weekend call girl." Two throw pillows fell off the couch as I stood up forcibly. Blood rushed from my head in a way that only provided increased clarity. "Should we establish a rate, *Mr. Sterling*? A Harvard body like mine doesn't come cheap, you know. What's the going rate for summa cum laude, huh?"

"Well, to be clear, it's not really your brain I'm after right now, Red." His words were playful, but his tone was sharp, bordering on cruel.

I smoothed down the sides of my pants before facing him. "Fuck. You," I said slowly and clearly, my cheeks suddenly blazing for a very different reason. "I'm not some goddamn object to be used at your beck and call. You're lucky I'm already leaving this firm; otherwise I'd file a sexual

harassment suit so big this firm would collapse from bad press alone, you utter. Fucking. Pig.”

I strode past him with as much indignation as I could manage, despite tripping briefly over the red shoes splayed about on the carpet. Their color, a vibrant shock against subdued brown and burgundy of the carpet, only reminded me further how insulting his offer was, from start to finish. Their red—the same red I had painted on my lips before coming up here—seemed garish. Whorish.

I reached to open the door, only to have it firmly held in place by a hand that slammed onto the wood over my shoulder.

“That’s quite a mouth you’ve got there, Red,” Sterling hummed into my ear. I could feel his chest touching the edge of my shoulder ever so slightly, and I did my best to ignore that unique scent that had me so titillated moments before. “But fair warning: a little spitfire only turns me on that much more.”

“Let me go,” I gritted through my teeth.

“No.”

With his other hand, he spun me around so I was effectively trapped between his arms against the door.

“Look at me,” he commanded.

Despite my best efforts not to, I couldn’t help but follow his order. I hated that just his proximity could eat through the rage and disgust over what was fundamentally an offer to prostitute myself. His expression echoed the same pent up longing and lust that I had also felt for the past three nights—

and something more. Maybe it was just the strain of how badly we both clearly wanted each other, but I thought I saw a note of pain in his fathomless eyes.

“Tell me you don’t feel what’s between us.”

His forearms, fencing either side of my head, flexed with tension. Was he holding himself back or bracing for my resistance?

“Can you tell me you didn’t feel it the second I walked into the house?” he demanded through clenched teeth. “I couldn’t talk, I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t fucking move. Can you really tell me you don’t want to see the inevitable *fireworks* that would come out of this?”

He leaned in close enough that our cheeks were almost touching. His minty breath whispered across my skin, and I fought the urge to slip a hand into his thick hair and pull his mouth into the sensitive skin at the base of my neck. All my righteousness was quickly, traitorously fading all over again.

“Can you tell me you didn’t want me to strip you down right here and take you in front of that fire?”

He grazed the tip of his nose down the line of my neck, eliciting goosebumps in its wake and a small, traitorous moan from the back of my throat. He growled back, low and fierce. His lips traced lightly back up my neck and paused over my mouth, just a few scant from a kiss.

“Let me make you feel good,” he rumbled as he slid one hand from the door down to grab me tightly around my waist. He pulled my body tightly against his, suggesting just how he intended to accomplish his request. “Please.”

“Ahh...” I moaned again, and without any further thought, both of my hands threaded into the thicket of hair at the base of his neck and yanked.

He needed no more invitation. His lips conquered mine completely as he pressed me hard against the door with the entire length of his body. He was an amazing kisser, sucking on my bottom lip like candy, tongue tangling over and over against with mine as if he couldn't taste enough of me. His hands dropped and gripped my backside so hard I yelped, a sound he quickly stifled with his lips. I was starting to fumble with the buttons of his shirt when we were suddenly interrupted by the loud, alarming ring of the telephone on his desk.

I froze, suddenly hyperaware that his secretary was just on the other side of the door behind my back. The phone rang three more times and fell silent again, but Sterling broke our kiss, visibly regretful at the interruption. His breath smelled of tea and mint, and I now knew he tasted even better. A few seconds ago, I was ready to tug the rest of my clothes off and mount him right there. Except.

“Jesus,” he gasped. “That really *is* quite a mouth on you.”

I didn't say anything, just chewed on my upper lip and avoided his searching gaze.

“Say yes,” he said as he buried his face into my neck. “Come to my house on Friday. Let me show you what I can do for you, Red.”

I almost said yes. I almost moaned again as his lips touched jaw and started to nibble their way up to my ear. But in moment of returned clarity, my eyes caught the edge the file

still sitting on the couch—a reminder of just how businesslike he wanted this endeavor to be. All I could envision was a stack of bills left on a nightstand, like he might treat a cheap hooker. I saw myself rearranging my schedule to meet *his* needs. Lying in bed, waiting for his phone calls until odd hours of the morning. Being pushed away the next day, treated like I was nothing. Made to feel like I was crazy for suspecting the worst. Arrangement or not, I had been here before.

I pushed him away forcefully, ignoring the confusion that clouded his handsome features and the way my skin yearned for his touch once it was gone.

“No,” I said quietly, with more assurance than I felt. “And not in the kind of way where you should think I mean yes just because you kissed me. I just mean no. As in never.”

“Skylar, please, I—”

“I’m sure there are a number of convenient escort services you can call to get what you want,” I said woodenly as I ducked under his arm, and grabbed the doorknob behind me. “You should have HR burn my file along with those goddamn shoes. I’d rather you didn’t have a way to contact me after I’m gone.”

I didn’t bother to wait for a response or even shut the door behind me. My blouse had come untucked and there was no way that my hair looked anything short of a disaster, but I still managed to smile politely at Margie on my way out. She watched curiously as I passed, but somehow I suspected that you didn’t become the assistant of one of the most powerful men in Boston without being able to keep your mouth shut. I barely registered the slam of a large, heavy door as I continued

back down the hall, back to the bottom floor where I belonged.

~

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Chapter 7

“Why not?”

Jane’s reaction to the meeting with Sterling was not at all what I expected. She shrugged and went back to eating her ramen at the small kitchen table. It was Jane’s version of comfort food, which told me she hadn’t had a very good day either. We had both come home and changed straight into our pajamas and bathrobes. Since she had spent the day at the library working on her reading, I had a feeling her woes were also related to men, which made me scared to ask. Jane’s love life often wasn’t easy to follow.

“It’s not like he suggested a monthly rate or anything,” she said through mouthful of soup. “He made some good points. You’re busy. He’s busy. Maybe he’s right. Neither of you have time for the relationship parts of sex. What’s not to like about hot, weekly sex with a gorgeous billionaire, some new clothes, and a driver in a city with some of the worst traffic in the country? Isn’t the Red Line down again this week?”

She shoved another forkful of noodles in her mouth with satisfaction, as if to say “the prosecution rests.” I grimaced as I pulled a container of matzo ball soup out of a paper bag. Jane wasn’t wrong, but he had just been so damn business-like about it all. I felt more like some kind of acquisition than a person.

“Do you even remember your last relationship?” Jane interrupted my thoughts, gesturing with her fork for emphasis.

“No, not if I can help it. It’s why I don’t like *talking* about him, Jane.” I tipped my soup into a bowl and padded around the kitchen counter to sit next to her at the table, spoon in hand.

“Patrick was supposed to be your boyfriend, and he treated you like shit. He was jealous and clingy, and at the same time he was off nailing every easy piece of ass in Manhattan so he could give you VD as a parting gift,” she continued, disregarding my comment. “And I saw how freaked out you were by the idea of dating a guy like Jared, who is so safe he’s practically a blow up doll. So maybe Sterling’s got the right idea. We—and by we, I do mean you—can’t afford right now to get wrapped up in a shitty relationship, and we clearly can’t handle a decent one. Maybe it’s better to define clear parameters. You’re good at business stuff, Sky. You could do this.”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” I said as I scooped up a bite of dumpling and broth. It wasn’t as good as my Bubbe’s, but it still reminded me of home, which I badly needed after a day like this. “But still, J, I’d at least like the invitation to stay the night, you know? So, you know, I feel like a person, and not a movie rental. Jesus.”

Jane stood up to clear her bowl, having demolished the entire to-go container within five minutes. Despite eating like a linebacker, the girl was a rail, blessed with a high metabolism that was aided by an occasional cigarette habit, unending coffee consumption, and a penchant for late night activities.

“He did give you the invitation to spend the night,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, to sleep in separate rooms!” I cried out, flinging my spoon and droplets of broth on the table, causing Jane to chuckle. “Or an entire separate apartment. You know, whatever’s most *convenient!*”

Jane stood on the other side of the counter, waiting patiently for me to quiet down.

“You finished?” she asked when I had dropped my spoon back to my bowl.

I glared at her. “Yes.”

“Good,” she said. “Now listen. He’s a businessman. He was just opening the first round of negotiations. You can always say no to whatever you like. No one sleeps well when they have to share a bed anyway.”

“But—”

“Just think about it,” she said as she started to clean up her dishes. “You ignore that part of yourself way too much, Sky. It might be just what you need before real life starts.”

~

I did think about it. For the rest of the week my thoughts would stray to Sterling’s warm lips and deft touch when I wasn’t carefully focused. But every time I walked into the building bearing his name in silver lettering above the entrance and across the glass doors, I scowled in recollection of the transactional manner with which he had approached me. I deserved more than to be some guy’s Friday night booty call.

Negotiating sex might work for Jane, but it wouldn't work for me.

By the end of the week I had all but managed to put Mr. Indecent Proposal's mouth out of my mind, caught up with the busy tasks of finishing the final days of my internship and before leaving for the weekend. At the end of the day on Friday, the junior associates rewarded the interns and temps with Dunkin' Donuts and coffee. Eric and Steve both stayed and kept working while the rest of us ate a donut or two and got ready to go. I gobbled mine in a hurry, since I had plans to take the eight o'clock bus from South Street Station to see my dad for the weekend before classes began.

"Skylar!"

Ben approached me with a box bearing the last of the donuts just as I was pulling the overnight bag I'd packed for the weekend from under my desk. I shook my head at the offer.

"Thanks," I said. "But I've already had two. Gonna have to spend an extra hour in the pool just to get rid of them. They were good, though."

Ben smiled and pushed his glasses further up his nose. "Couldn't hurt to try. Hey, listen, Laura and I wanted to say that we appreciated your hard work over the last several months. You really stood out among the interns. If you change your mind about working for Sterling, we could probably find a place for you here."

I smiled. "Thanks, Ben. I really appreciate that. Let me know if you ever need a full time public interest associate. I'll let you know if something changes."

He winked and went to solicit the rest of the donuts to others. I hauled my bag over my shoulder and said my farewells.

“You know, this doesn’t have to be good bye if you give me your number,” Steve said. “Although since I’ll be working with your buddy the chick-magnet over there, maybe I’ll still get to see your pretty face.”

“Maybe,” I said, accepting an awkward hug. “See you, Steve.”

“Hey Skylar,” Eric called from across the room, where he was chatting up one of the legal assistants who had stopped in to say “hello” in a familiar way. I sighed. Since he’d accepted a junior associate position, Eric was really going to have to stop dipping his pen in the company ink if he ever planned to make partner at Sterling. Or wanted to avoid a harassment suit. From the looks of the girl’s face, it looked like he’d already started to cut those ties anyway.

Chocolate donut in hand, he jogged over to where I stood by the door. “See you in class on Monday? You’re taking the family law clinic, right?”

I nodded. “Yep, bright and early. You’re doing that too?”

He nodded back. “Yeah. They say I need more diverse electives before I take the bar since this is a full-service firm. Have you talked to you-know-who since Monday?”

I hadn’t told Eric everything about what went down in Sterling’s office, but I had insinuated enough on the train back to Cambridge that he had gotten the basic picture. He had been asking me all week if I’d talked to him.

“No,” I said. “Like I keep saying, I’m not interested. But actually, I have to go. I have a bus to catch.”

“Chinatown?” he asked before taking a large bite of his donut.

I nodded. “Yep. Eight o’clock. I don’t want to miss it—otherwise I won’t get to the city until after one.”

He nodded, swallowing. “Cool. Be careful, will you? Those things catch on fire.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I teased, stepping up on my toes to give him a kiss on the cheek. “Have a good weekend. Try not to get a yourself sued.”

I walked out of the small room where I had worked for most of the last five months and made my way to the main entrance of the building, where I turned in my keycard to the security office and exited through the massive revolving doors. It hadn’t snowed again since Monday, so the streets were thankfully clear and ice-free. I walked out to the curb and looked down the street to hail a cab.

A shiny black town car pulled up in front of me, and I stepped back as driver came around to open the door for a drop-dead gorgeous woman wearing a thick fur coat over black trousers and a black blouse. She smiled at me with perfectly lined red lips as she exited, but it was a cold smile, the kind reserved for nameless help and people on the street. Her dark hair was pinned into an effortless chignon at the base of her neck, revealing large diamond studs at her ears that matched a sizable yet tasteful pendant hanging from her neck. She commanded the attention of just about everyone on the sidewalk with her obvious grace and confidence. I wasn’t the

only one watching as she brushed past me toward the lobby, the stiletto heels of her boots clicking impatiently on the concrete.

When I turned back to face the curb again, I nearly shrieked when I was almost knocked over by the second person exiting the town car.

“Shit! I’m so sorry, miss. Are you all right?”

I looked up to find Brandon Sterling gazing at me with obvious concern that changed almost immediately to interest. He looked at me up and down with obvious curiosity, and possibly amusement.

I looked down at my clothes. In preparation for the ride, I had changed out of my work clothes into a more comfortable pair of jeans, black ankle boots, and an oversized gray turtleneck sweater that peeked over the collar of my parka. My favorite gray, knit beanie covered my bright hair, which lay in a casual braid down one shoulder. I had replaced my contacts, which tended to irritate my eyes in the cold, dry weather, with the tortoise-shell glasses. It was a far cry from the normal business attire he had seen me wear the other occasions we’d met.

“Something funny, Mr. Sterling?”

His smirk grew into an impossibly sweet smile—it was almost enough to make me forget his crass offer. “Not at all, Red. I was just thinking you look...well, more like the student you are, I suppose. It suits you.” His eyes dropped to the overnight bag slung over my arm. “Going somewhere?”

A flash of what looked like jealousy blazed across his strong features, which immediately resumed a look of bland calm. Flustered, I tried and failed several times to hike the strap over my shoulder, but it fell easily down the slippery exterior of my parka. Finally, I managed to keep it on. I pushed my glasses back up my nose.

“Classes start Monday,” I said impatiently. “I’m getting out of town for the weekend to visit family.” I glanced at my watch. “Actually, I need to get going if I’m going to make the eight o’clock bus.”

“Bran!”

The woman in the mink coat was standing in the doorway of the office building, ignoring the multiple associates I noticed waiting awkwardly behind her to exit. She frowned briefly in my direction before sending a bright white smile toward Sterling.

“Bran, dear, aren’t you coming?” she asked.

“Be right there.”

He wasn’t quite fast enough to erase the sadness from his face before I looked back at him. He rubbed a leather-gloved hand over his features and sighed before sending me a brief half-smile.

“I’m sorry about our...meeting on Monday, Skylar,” he said soberly. “Really. It was...not what I originally intended, I promise. If I could take it back and start over...well, I would.”

His woeful half-smile tightened visibly as he looked over my shoulder toward the office—likely to the beautiful woman waiting for him inside. Was she his girlfriend? He had said he

wasn't with anyone else. Perhaps an arrangement like he had requested with me, then. Whatever they were, he didn't seem very happy in her company.

Before I could say anything, he reached out a tentative hand and squeezed me gently on the shoulder, the tips of his fingers lingering a moment before they fell away.

"You have a good trip, Skylar," he said quietly, and walked away.

~

I never liked taking the long bus ride to New York, but at less than twenty dollars each way, it was the best option for a poor student when compared to the hundred-plus-dollar ticket for the train or plane. The buses were noisy, usually packed to the gills with other poor travelers like myself. While I had yet to actually be on a bus that stopped because of mechanical problems, I had heard the same horror stories Eric mentioned of the rickety old things bursting into flames right on the interstate. Still, the drivers drove fast and efficiently, and it wasn't uncommon to make the trip in less than four hours if there was no traffic.

Being second in line to board, I was able to get my preferred seat—right in the front, where I could watch the road and avoid carsickness. My seat mate was an elderly lady who barely reached my shoulder and didn't crowd our small space. She lived in Roxbury and was going down for the weekend to visit her son in New Jersey.

"Do you come to New York often?" she asked, her r's barely evident with her thick Boston accent.

“Fairly often,” I said. “My dad lives in Brooklyn. I grew up there.”

“Oh, what a good daughter you are, going to see your dad. I wish my Tommy would make the trip up here, but he’s got a big job on Wall Street, says he can’t get away.”

She lifted her hands up into the air as if to say, “what can you do?” Then she looked at me up and down the way only older women can do without appearing brazen.

“Pretty girl like you. Look at all that red hair. Is your family Irish?”

I smiled and nodded. “A bit on both sides. I’m told I get the hair from my grandfather. I never knew him, though.”

“Does your dad look like him?”

“Not at all,” I told her. “He takes after my Bubbe with dark hair.”

She balked at my casual use of Yiddish. “You’re an Irish Jew? Honey, you are definitely from New York. There ain’t nowhere else someone who looks like you would have a bat mitzvah, that’s for sure.”

I smiled and looked down at the copy of the *Harvard Law Review* in my lap. I had never had a bat mitzvah; technically I wasn’t Jewish, since my mother wasn’t. It didn’t matter that I had been raised by my dad and grandmother. Dad didn’t go to synagogue any more, and Bubbe never seemed to care one way or another if I did. “I guess not.”

“Your dad like your boyfriend?”

I frowned and looked back up at her. “Excuse me?”

She tugged a bag of knitting from underneath her seat and pulled out what looked like the start of a tiny sweater “This is for my daughter’s baby, due in October. Little girl. I can’t wait to be a grandmother. I feel like I’ve been waiting forever to have grandkids.” She leaned over knowingly. “Pretty girl like you must have a boyfriend, don’t you, dear?”

Before I could stop it, a certain handsome face with dark blond hair flashed through my head. That thick lion’s mane. That stupid Cheshire grin. Even when he wasn’t there, it got him what he wanted. Oh, he would just love this conversation.

I shook my head, as much to get the image out of it as to answer her question. “No, no boyfriend. I’m in law school—too busy.”

“Oh, I see,” she said knowingly, with the trace of sadness I often heard in Bubbe’s voice every time she asked about my personal life. I suppressed a huff and opened my copy of the *Review* to an article on the decision to legalize gay marriage in Massachusetts. It popped up a couple times in my classes, so it wouldn’t hurt to be up to speed about the changes in the law for the clinic.

The bus chugged on into the cold night, and it didn’t take long for the hum of the wheels on the pavement to put me to sleep against the cold window. I woke up briefly for the bathroom break at a roadside gas station, but quickly burrowed into my bunched parka and slept soundly for the rest of the trip.

I awoke to a light tap on my shoulder. My seat mate, who had her knitting neatly bagged up in my purse, smiled kindly

at me as she shoved her arms back through her practical winter coat.

“We’re here, dear,” she said kindly.

Blearily, I pulled my gray cap back on and shoved my glasses back on my nose. After pulling on my parka, I filed off the bus after my seat mate.

“Well, I hope you have a nice visit with your pops,” she told me as she took her suitcase from the driver.

“Thanks,” I replied, taking my overnight bag from him as well. “You have a nice trip with your son.”

“I will. Tommy’s waiting for me just over there in a taxi. I’d offer to introduce you, but I see you have your own escort waiting for you.”

“What?” Confused, I looked up from my phone, on which I was checking the time.

She chuckled and tapped one finger on the side of her nose. “Sure, you’re too busy. Well, he’s a handsome one, dear, I’ll give you that.” She reached out and patted me on the cheek with a leather-gloved hand before pointing over my shoulder. “You have a good night, sweetheart.”

As she walked toward one of the waiting taxis outside of the bus station, I turned over my shoulder, wondering who she was talking about. And there, of course, was Brandon Sterling, with that damn smile in its full-blown glory as he pushed casually off a streetlight pole like he had been waiting there for me my whole life.

~

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Chapter 8

“What the hell are you doing here?”

The question flew out, sharp and curt, before I could stop it. I was bedraggled, still half-asleep, and I probably had upholstery lines on the side of my face. The last thing I expected to see was six feet, four inches of heart-stoppingly gorgeous, utterly chauvinistic tycoon waiting for me on a poorly lit corner in East Chinatown. With almost a solid day’s worth of dark blond growth on his ruddy cheeks, Sterling had a somewhat more rugged quality contrasting his three-thousand-dollar veneer, but he still looked completely out of place in this neighborhood.

A light nudge at my back reminded me that there were still other people waiting for their bags, so I handed a tip to the porter in exchange for mine and walked past Sterling without an answer. The nearest Q line stop was at least fifteen blocks down Canal Street, and I wanted to get out of the cold.

“Skylar! Hey! Where are you going?”

I continued to walk, in no mood to play games. It was after midnight. I was tired and hungry, having skipped dinner. My bullshit tolerance level was down to zero. I felt, rather than heard, his steps quicken so he was walking in stride with me.

“Hey,” he said again. “I don’t even get a hello?”

I sighed, but refused to meet his gaze as I kept striding toward the more crowded parts of Canal Street. I didn’t need that face doing things to me again. I just wanted to get home.

“Skylar, really?”

Finally, I mustered the best glare I could, even though just looking at him made my steps falter slightly. “Fine. Hi. How are you. And what are you doing here, *Mr. Sterling?*”

“Brandon, I told you. Five days ago I had my tongue down your throat, Red, so I think we’re past formalities, don’t you?” He raised a sly eyebrow, and my steps tripped again.

I huffed, looked back to the pavement in front of me, and tried to outpace him, but his long legs had no problem keeping up with my decidedly shorter ones. Deciding to give up the fight, I stopped and faced him, ignoring the way my bag started to fall down my shoulder again. This stupid coat. Stupid bag. I’d have given anything in that moment for a backpack or a rolling suitcase. God, I couldn’t *wait* to get home.

“Look,” I snapped, finally letting my duffel fall to the ground by my feet. “Don’t take this personally, but what the fuck is your problem? Seriously. Are you stalking me or something?”

He grinned, and I looked away. His face absolutely transformed with a smile; irritatingly, it appeared that the more he did it, the more impossible it was not to be attracted to it, even in my foul mood.

“It’s cute, you know,” he said. “Your accent comes out when you’re really pissed off.” He leaned in close so his mouth hovered next to my ear. “I wouldn’t mind bringing that out that growl some place more private, you know?”

That did it. Suddenly I didn’t see a smile any more. I only saw red.

“Oh my God! Are you some kind of creep? I don’t know what about me makes you think ‘call girl’, but Jesus fucking *Christ!* I might be the daughter of a garbage collector, but that doesn’t make me trash, you got me, motherfucker? What the fuck is wrong with you? Do you always treat women like this? Did you not learn that no means no? Do I need to call the fucking cops?”

I nodded down the street, where there were a few police cars were parked outside one of the many Chinese restaurants. Even at this time of night in the middle of winter, the central part of Canal Street was crowded with throngs of tourists, so there were usually at least a few squad cars within shouting range.

Sterling’s cocky smirk disappeared almost instantaneously. His large blue eyes blinked, and he drew a hand roughly through his hair. His ears were turning red in the cold, and all signs of that infuriating arrogance were gone.

“Fuck,” he muttered as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket. “Fuck. No. God, I’m doing this all wrong, aren’t I?”

“That would be a massive understatement.” I crossed my arms and glared.

He met my gaze and swallowed roughly. “I’m just... Shit, I don’t do this, Skylar. Normally I wouldn’t bother, but there’s something...”

He shook his head in confusion, but I wasn’t sure with what. I sighed. I didn’t have the patience tonight to figure out this guy’s mood swings.

I picked my duffel bag up and heaved it back over my shoulder, then continued my walk toward the subway entrance, still at least eight ten blocks away. A few seconds later, his footsteps caught up with me yet again.

“Skylar. I’m sorry. Truly. Can we start over? Please? I didn’t mean for you to get that feeling from me at all. I’m not some kind of psycho stalker, despite what you might think. And if you knew me, you’d know that I’m the last person to judge someone based on their background.”

“Oh?” I asked dubiously. “And why’s that?”

“Because I don’t exactly come from much myself.”

I stopped walking again and turned to look at him directly. His blue eyes bore no trace of sarcasm—they were wide, guileless.

“Garbage collector’s daughter?” He pointed at me before turning his finger back to himself. “Foster kid.”

Yeah, he certainly had me there. It didn’t explain his crude behavior, but it at least absolved him of being a classist dick.

“Oh,” I said. “Well. Really?”

“Eight years in the system,” he said, his voice strangely upbeat. “Two when I was a baby, six more after I turned twelve. In between I was stuck in a shitty row house in Dorchester.”

It didn’t escape me the way the “r” in “Dorchester” was slightly flattened out, the way cabbies and my classmates from the rougher parts of Boston sometimes spoke. I had barely heard Sterling break his usually region-less diction; he obviously worked even harder than I did to erase whatever

remnants of his former life still remained with him. I sympathized; accents were hard to shake.

“Dorchester, huh?” I asked.

He grimaced. “I don’t really like talking about it, but if you insist, I’ll tell you about it in the car.”

He cocked his head toward the ever-present town car that had apparently been creeping alongside us the entire time.

I frowned. “Well, that solves the rich kid problem, but you’re still a creepy stalker. You had your driver bring you all the way here so you could appear at my bus stop?” I didn’t know whether to be alarmed or flattered. It was just weird.

He glanced back at the car with disgust, as if he realized for the first time what it looked like to me. “Ah, no, this is definitely *not* my car. My driver is still in Boston.”

I scoffed. I had forgotten he actually had a live-in driver.

“I took a helicopter and called a car from the helipad,” he continued like that was somehow better, oblivious to the fact that he was basically speaking a foreign language. “This is just a regular town car. I’ll give you a ride to wherever you’re going—I’m guessing your family’s place in Brooklyn, right? It’ll save you time and train fare.”

I pursed my lips, still determined not to give in, despite the puppy-dog look I was currently on the receiving end of. I might have felt bad about the foster care stuff, and he might be as awkward with women as he claimed to be, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t still creeped out. “Ah, no thanks. I don’t get into cars with strange men I don’t know who follow me from city to city by helicopter. Subway’s fine for me.”

I continued down the street, dodging around the increasing crowds of tourists perusing the late-night tchotchke stands and gawking at the rows of Peking ducks in the restaurant windows.

“Skylar, you spent the night at my house,” Brandon argued, fighting to keep his big frame paced evenly with mine as I weaved through the crowd. “We’re hardly strangers at this point, don’t you think?”

“Fine. I don’t get into cars with former bosses who have propositioned me for sex either,” I insisted, hitching my bag over my shoulder once again. “Besides, I like the train.”

“Don’t be stupid. It’s well after midnight. It’s not safe.”

I frowned back at him. “Mr. Sterling—”

“Brandon!” he interrupted with a groan. “Can you *please* just call me Brandon!”

This time he couldn’t keep the note of equal parts desperation and frustration out of his voice. He ran both hands furiously through his hair, back to front, causing pieces to stick up around his ears. Charmingly disarrayed, he looked the farthest thing from some big-wheeling CEO, full of arrogance and bullshit. He looked like a normal guy trying to figure out how to talk to girl he liked, flubbing it every chance he got. It was...charming.

“Okay. Brandon,” I repeated calmly, although I refused to meet his eyes when I said it. I needed to hold onto my resolve. “Please listen. I’ve been taking the subway by myself since I was ten. I’ve lived in this city practically my whole life. And I

can tell you, without a doubt, most of New York is safer at any time of night than half of Boston.”

He stared at me, dumbfounded. “You’re really going to refuse a ride?”

“Yes,” I said adamantly, defiantly pulling my beanie further over my ears. The wind coming off the East River ran down Canal Street like a funnel.

“Try to do the right thing, what do you get?” he grumbled to himself. “Well, I guess there’s nothing I can do.”

“Guess not.”

But as I started down the steps into the subway entrance, I found him matching each footstep with one of his.

“What are you doing now?” I demanded.

“I’m seeing you home. No—” he held a hand up while the other fished into his interior jacket pocket for a small billfold. “I won’t make any more inappropriate comments, I promise. I’m not an asshole, Skylar, and I’ll prove it to you. But seeing you home—that’s not up for discussion. You’re not walking around by yourself this late at night. I can be stubborn too, Red.”

Several retorts rose to my lips, but all were cut off by the adorable perseverance on his face. In a moment, the arrogant shithead was completely gone, leaving only the man I had met that first night—the confident, if slightly shy man who followed me into a blizzard and took me into his home to make sure I was safe. Maybe—just maybe—he really was worried about me.

“Are you going to leave me alone after this?” I asked as I pointed an accusatory finger. “Or am I going to find you lurking outside my family’s house?”

Brandon held up two hands in surrender. “You’ll never see me again if that’s what you want. I just can’t handle letting you walk around on dark streets past midnight. Soon as you’re home safe, I’m gone.”

I squinted at him, considering. He blinked, no sign of guile or mischief left in his eyes, now a pale blue. I blew a long breath between pursed lips. Maybe I should have said no. But the fact was...I didn’t really want to.

“Fine,” I said, and continued walking with him down to the train.

It wasn’t until I had already run my MetroCard through the reader that I realized he hadn’t accompanied me through the turn stall.

“You need to get a card over there,” I said, nodding at a pod of dispensers where a few people were lined up to purchase their cards. His face fell.

“No tokens anymore?”

I bit back a laugh. “How long has it been since you took the train?”

A faint flush of embarrassment rose in his cheeks, which made me want to pull him toward me and hug him. Shit.

“I’ll get a card,” he muttered, and trudged back to purchase one of the flimsy pieces of plastic for his very own.

~

“It’s a good thing I came with you,” Brandon said once we were comfortably aboard the train and well on our way across the East River. He spoke loudly so he could be heard over the roar of the tracks. “Maybe the people aren’t so dangerous, but I saw two rats on the tracks who would eat you for dinner. I think they actually carried machetes.”

I smiled. “Oh, that’s nothing. My dad’s seen some in dumpsters he swore were as big as terriers.”

Brandon chuckled with me, but his face paled visibly. “That’s disgusting,” he pronounced.

At that point, I laughed out loud, startling the other few passengers in the car. “You haven’t spent time around normal people in a while, have you?”

He narrowed his eyes down at me, though they were still full of mirth.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said. “I take the T to work every day.”

“You mean to the office that is literally ten blocks from your immense house on the Commons?” I asked.

He faked a double-take. “You mean I can walk there? And here I’ve been going to Dorchester and back every morning. This is going to do wonders to my morning commute!”

I giggled. I couldn’t help it. It was increasingly evident that when Brandon wasn’t trying to put the moves on me, he was actually quite charming.

As the train stopped in Williamsburg, an obviously inebriated pair staggered their way into our car and collapsed on the bench seat next to Brandon. They were a young couple,

probably a few years younger than me. They were also clearly dressed for a night out and not for the weather: the girl wore an extremely short leather skirt paired with thigh-high black boots, while her date had on fashionably skinny jeans and a button down shirt under his leather jacket. As soon as they landed on the seat, they were all over each other, shoving their tongues into each other's mouths and pawing at the hems of their garments.

Brandon and I sat awkwardly next to them, suddenly finding things like the subway map and the Spanish ads for laser hair removal incredibly interesting. We looked everywhere but at the couple and each other—I knew that one glance would make me giggle.

The girl kicked one leg in her passion, hitting Brandon hard enough that he knocked into me too. He looked down at me and mouthed, "Ouch!", forcing me to bite my lip to keep from laughing aloud. When she kicked him again, he scooted several inches closer to me, allowing the couple to position themselves almost horizontally beside us.

"Skylar," Brandon whispered loudly in my ear.

I looked up at his laughing eyes. "What?" I whispered back.

"Do you think they need a condom? Maybe some assistance?"

I stifled a giggle and shook my head.

"Then do you think you could move down a little bit so I don't have an accidental threesome?"

I chuckled into my mittens and nodded before sliding farther down the seats so we could give the couple more room to writhe around.

Two stops later, after they stumbled off together, Brandon and I both burst out laughing as soon as the doors closed.

“Holy shit!” I crowed in between heaves. “I thought they were going to make a baby right there!” My stomach hurt from laughing so hard.

“I think I might have gotten herpes.” Brandon was also red in the face. “At least now I know why you wanted to take the train.”

I smacked him lightly on the shoulder. “I think you actually liked it. You should have offered *her* to pay for a sex pad. She probably would have gone for it.”

Brandon rolled his eyes and shook his head. “One day you’re going to forgive me for that,” he said. “If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll convince you that I’m actually a decent guy.”

By the end of his statement, the humor was completely gone from his voice. He wasn’t laughing any more, and his wide blue gaze had me completely transfixed with its mix of vulnerability and kindness. We sat quietly as the train rumbled beneath us, staring at each other until I forced myself to remember the way he’d talked to me. I pulled my glance away and renewed my study of the subway ads above us.

Brandon sighed beside me. “This is frustrating. I’m not an asshole, Skylar. I still can’t believe I actually had the stones to ask you that.”

“So why did you?” I was curious now, and wanted to believe I’d get a real answer. This guy, the one who could laugh at himself and who wanted to see a woman home safe, seemed like a good man. Not the type who would turn women in to crude courtesans.

He sighed deeply and shrugged. “I...it’s hard to explain.”

“Try,” I prodded.

He gave me a look I was starting to recognize—the one that said, “You’re not going to let it go, are you?” I raised my eyebrows expectantly. No, I definitely was not.

He sighed again and sat forward, talking down to the ground while he balanced his forearms over his knees. “All right, fine. It’s been a while, if you have to know the truth. Since I’ve dated anyone. The last woman I was with seriously...well, it was pretty clear by the end she was only interested in my money. Anyone I’ve been with since has either been a one-night thing or nothing at all. Then I meet you, and I can tell you’re not a one-night kind of girl. I really want...well, I guess I figured that I should probably give you what you’d want from the get-go. It didn’t even occur to me you wouldn’t want any of it. I’m sorry. Truly. More than you know.”

My heart squeezed at his words. They weren’t flowery, but the slow cadence of them and the way his voice broke over the word “truly” eroded several more layers of suspicion. I hadn’t stopped to imagine what he must have thought of me, an intern succumbing to his advances. I knew so much more about him in some ways—why wouldn’t he have thought I had my own angle on what I could get out his life? He was the holy grail of

legal and business connections in Boston. And probably a lot of eligible bachelor pools too.

Slowly I reached out to touch him lightly on the shoulder, but before I could reply that all was forgiven, the conductor announced our stop, and the car jerked to a halt. I stood up and pulled my bag over my shoulder.

“This is our stop,” I said as the doors opened behind me. “Come on, Casanova. You can keep apologizing on the walk home.”

~

We chatted easily as we walked down Ditmas Avenue. The truth was, Brandon was actually really good company when he wasn't trying to hit on me. He was witty and smart, but also funny, down-to-earth, and surprisingly easy to talk to.

By the time I stopped in front of a small club, my side hurt from laughing so much. I turned eagerly toward the entrance, where the strains of a jazz trio hummed from within.

Brandon looked to me in confusion. “You live in a jazz club?”

I rolled my eyes, but shivered in the cold. “Yeah, I totally live in a jazz club. The vinyl seats make for a great night's sleep.” I turned back to the entrance, where the doorman looked bored on his stool.

“Hey Charlie,” I said. The big man was shivering slightly beneath his tight black beanie and massive parka, but he managed to conjure a small smile for me.

“Hiya sweetheart,” he replied kindly as he leaned over to take my quick peck on the cheek. “They just started their

second set. He know you're coming tonight?"

I shook my head. "No, I thought I'd surprise him." I unwound my large wool scarf from around my neck and handed it to him. "Here. You look like you're freezing."

Charlie didn't blink, just accepted the scarf and tied it awkwardly around his neck, obviously caring little that it was bright red and belonged to a girl about a third his size. "Thanks, sweetie. It's colder than a bitch out here tonight."

I turned to find Brandon examining the entrance of the club, half concerned, half curious. The temperature had probably dropped another five degrees in the last hour, and I realized he didn't have his town car to climb into.

"My dad works here most weekends," I told him. "I'm going to say hi before I walk home. You can wait here for your car if you want."

He furrowed his brow. "Wait, what? No. Are you staying until the end of the set?"

When I shook, he shook his head back. "You're not walking home by yourself. It's not safe."

I tried to protest, but he laid a hand briefly on my arm, calming me.

"I won't try anything," he assured me. "I promise. Besides, I'm pretty sure this guy will kick the shit out of me if I do. Right, man?"

Charlie didn't reply, just glared at Brandon and waited for my response.

Brandon looked back at me with raised hands. "See?"

I sighed, but was unable to withhold my smile completely at the contrast between Brandon's imploring expression and Charlie's death glare behind him.

"Just come in, then," I relented, and we walked into the small, dark club to meet my father.

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Chapter 9

Nick's was the kind of place you couldn't find any more in the downtown Manhattan, or even around Park Slope or Williamsburg. It was the kind of place I had grown up in, doing my homework perched on the stained bar top before they opened, and helping band members lug instruments in and out of the small, dark doorways for sound checks. The slow pace of Nick's rarely drew more than ten or fifteen patrons at a time, but that also meant that no one cared about anything there but the music. There was no spot for this kind of establishment any more in the bustling parts of Manhattan, where all the jazz greats once started out. The Blue Note was basically a Disney Land ride, whereas Nick's still had the gritty hint of urban underbelly that always inspired good music.

Brandon followed me into the bar, gingerly stepping around clusters of tables, chairs, and barstools in a way that made me wonder just how long it had been since he had gone anywhere that didn't offer box seats, VIP reservations, or valet parking.

The club tunneled narrowly like a wormhole into the basement of a Brooklyn brownstone. Its dank interior was lined on one side with small tables and red, vinyl bench seats that likely hadn't been replaced since the late seventies, and on the other with a worn bar top that sold a lot of potent well drinks along with the occasional scotch. Stale alcohol practically glazed the air, along with sporadic whiffs of Charlie's cigarette smoke whenever the front door opened. At

the back of the club was a tiny dance floor in front of a tinier stage. It just big enough to hold Dad's jazz quartet, which boasted a trumpet, an upright bass, a piano, and a drum kit.

I slid onto one of the bench seats across from the bar, where I wouldn't distract the band too much while they finished their set.

"Do you want a drink?" Brandon asked, still standing in front of the table I'd chosen.

I looked up as I shucked my outerwear, scarf, and gloves. "Um...sure. I guess. MacCallan Twelve with a splash of water. Just tell the bartender it's for me. He won't charge you."

Brandon didn't reply, but the slight lift of his eyebrows before he walked away revealed some surprise at my order. I snorted. His reaction wasn't uncommon; most girls my age didn't drink whiskey. Those that did drank it with Coke or a lot of sour mix.

Amos, the willowy trumpet player from Trinidad, was the first to notice me with a smile and a brief wave, while Doug, the bassist and my dad's truck partner, grooved to a solo. The drummer was new. Dad often joked that it was the band's curse that they could never hold onto a decent set of sticks. As usual, Dad was, lost in his own world at the piano, his fingers floating effortlessly over the keys.

He looked the same as always, his slight form clothed in his typical performance attire: worn black pants from the Goodwill and a white, oxford button-down, rolled up at the elbows. I used to tease him that he looked like a waiter in that outfit, but he always shrugged and said that classics never go out of style. His floppy brown hair, gray at the temples and at

the base of his neck, was parted down the middle and matched the trim mustache that was just a little grayer than the hair on his head. His eyes were closed and his head leaned low as he bobbed back and forth to the rhythm set by Doug and the drummer, his fingers gliding up and down the keys in velvety riffs.

I leaned onto my elbows with my eyes closed to listen, just as I had done all my life. It didn't matter how long I had been gone—I wasn't home until I could hear my dad play.

“They're really good.” Brandon sat down in the seat across from me and slid my whiskey across the table. He took a drink of something slightly darker. “The piano player sounds like Bill Evans.” He removed his coat and draped it over the back of his seat, not taking his eyes off the quartet.

“That's my dad.”

I smiled at Brandon's double take between me and my father as I took a small sip of whiskey. We didn't look much alike, other than our slight frames. If pictures were any indicator, I had my grandfather's flaming hair, Bubbe's olive skin, and my mother's green eyes. But Dad and I were both small, and I had definitely inherited his love of music.

“Well,” Brandon remarked as he took a sip of his own drink. It smelled like a very nice brandy. “So much for stereotypes. I can't imagine him picking up garbage.”

I shrugged. “Some people really do just have day jobs so they can do other stuff.”

It was true. Raising me—well, that and a few other vices—had prevented Dad from ever really pursuing his music to

the fullest. He'd had a few offers over the years to play with some of the greats, but always turned them down, citing family commitments. Tours were always out of the question, even with Bubbe there to look after me. Still, just because he couldn't take a little girl on the road with him, it didn't mean his heart wasn't one hundred percent dedicated to those black and white keys. I admired him all the more for that.

“Did he teach you to play?”

I looked back over my whiskey at Brandon. “A bit. I'm nowhere near as good as he is, though.”

Brandon nodded his head in response, watching the trio as Dad launched into a short solo. His hands flew over the keys, dipping into spontaneous trills that were as smooth as water in a brook. The song effortlessly melded into another, and we listened without speaking for a good fifteen minutes.

I was content just to sit in silence; I didn't really like talking to people when I was at a show, and especially not when Dad was playing. Music, to me, was meant to be listened to, not talked over. Nothing bothered me more than trying to hold a conversation when something great was happening on stage.

At the end of the last song of the medley, Amos leaned in and said something to Dad, which caused him to look over at our table, mustache stretched with a grin.

“I think you've been discovered,” Brandon said.

I could already feel my cheeks going red. I was counting on going incognito until the end of the set, rather than what usually happened when I was spotted in the middle.

“Sorry about this,” I mumbled. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“What?”

Before I could explain, Dad leaned over and spoke into the microphone positioned at his shoulder.

“We’ve got a little surprise for you, folks. My daughter, the very beautiful and talented Skylar Crosby, is visiting us from up North. Let’s see if we can get her up here to sing us a little song. Hey, Valentine’s Day’s in just a few weeks, ain’t it?”

That was my cue. As the few patrons in the bar gave a couple of lackluster claps that were supplemented the bartender’s loud hoot of approval, I stood up and left Brandon, his mouth hanging open while I sidled through the tables and chairs and took a seat next at the piano.

“Hey Pippi,” Dad greeted me with my childhood nickname, giving me a brief peck on the cheek as I sat down beside him. “Nice lookin’ date over there with you. Should we make a dedication to someone special?”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s just a friend, Dad,” I said with a brief smile. “Let’s get this embarrassment over with, all right?”

We launched into the familiar riffs of “My Funny Valentine,” playing it Chet Baker-style in the arrangement Dad had written for us when I was little. Doug and Amos chimed in with their parts, having been privy to similar ad hoc performances many times before over the years. When the drummer finally caught up with us, we were all in an easy rhythm together, and Dad nodded at me to start singing.

We jammed up there together for five minutes or so. I wasn't a great singer, but the song fit the naturally low timbre of my voice, and Dad chimed in several times in harmony, like we had done countless times. I let my fingers remember the familiar movements of my solo, practicing the same melodies over the keys. I never had a talent for improvisation. Dad had the good ear; my abilities were rooted more in precision.

I found myself avoiding the table where I was sitting before, instead aiming my gaze squarely at the keys beneath my fingertips. Although I wasn't normally shy about performing with my dad—it was easy to pass it off as a cute father-daughter act when I messed up, and when I didn't, people generally seemed to like it anyway—this time I felt unaccountably nervous as I played.

“Each day is Valentine's Day,” we crooned into the mic, and I waited as Dad added a few final flourishes on the keys in tandem with the Amos's buttery brass notes. The song finally ended, and the few patrons in the bar all clapped, enthusiastically this time. There was even one couple in the back who had been inspired to slow dance to our rendition, so I figured it wasn't the worst version we'd ever done.

“Thanks, Pippi,” Dad said, his eyes already half shut as he toyed around with the keys. Doug was tuning his bass while Amos and the drummer made some crass jokes to the crowd. “You guys going to stay until the end of the set? We've got another hour left, but I know the guys would love to say hello.”

“Not tonight, Dad, sorry,” I said. “Just to finish our drinks, and then I'm heading home. I'm beat. Will you tell the guys

I'll stay next time? I'll see you in the morning.”

He nodded, starting a riff for the next song. “Sure, sweetheart. Love you, kid.”

I kissed him on the cheek and walked off the stage, scrupulously avoiding Brandon's eyes as I approached our table. I sat down and fiddled with my glass after taking an unnecessarily large gulp of whiskey. He hadn't taken his eyes off me since I'd walked up to the stage, and now he was practically staring a hole through my forehead. I took another slug from my glass.

“Most people do that before they have to get up on stage, not after,” Brandon remarked. “But then again, it usually makes them fuck up. Nice pipes, by the way. And you lied when you told me you suck on the piano.”

I finally looked up at him, and was struck by the obvious awe in his eyes that he was trying very hard to tone down with nonchalance. I wasn't sure if they were for my benefit or for his ego, but I appreciated his compliments either way.

“I didn't say I suck,” I said, fiddling with my glass as I looked back at the quartet, which was now covering “So What.” “I just said I'm not as good as he is.”

“Well, I guess that's what happens when you major in music at NYU, huh?”

I shrugged. “I don't really play jazz much. Just a couple of things he taught me. Mostly I studied classical. I'm too much of a square for jazz.”

“What makes you say that?”

I nodded at my dad, whose eyes were completely closed again while he hunched over the keys, moving to his own rhythm while he played. I smiled. Try as I might, I could never quite lose myself the way he could. “Look at that. Does that seem like disciplined to you?”

“So, you like discipline, huh?”

I pursed my lips, pondering the question. “I like control,” I said. “Or, at least I like to know what’s coming. Jazz is all about improvisation, all about the moment, whereas with a classical piece, I always play it the way I want, the same way, every time. There’s comfort in that, you know?” I shrugged, taking another large sip of my whiskey. “I guess I’m a stiff.”

Brandon smiled, but it wasn’t the cocky smile I had seen before. This one was calmer, less blinding, and nakedly appreciative of me. It was a slow and gradual across his face, and I watched as one dimple, then two eventually appeared in his cheeks. He leaned over his drink, circling the edge of the glass with his finger.

“Skylar,” he said seriously, his blue eyes wide and magnetic. “I don’t know much about you, but I know you are definitely not a stiff.”

I snorted. “You hardly know me well enough to say that.”

“Maybe not,” Brandon conceded. “But the girl who was up there on that stage? She was something else. You made every single person in this place feel every word you were singing, every note you were playing. It doesn’t matter if you play it the same way every time. Anyone who can do that is no stiff.”

We stared at each other for what seemed like several minutes, as if we were trying to figure each other out. If this was a game he was playing, I had to admit: it was a damn good one.

“Skylar, honey?”

A familiar, gravelly voice broke our standoff, and I looked up to where Nick, the bartender and owner of the establish, stood over our table. His graying black eyebrows were furrowed over his ape-like brow, and he was polishing a glass with a worn bar cloth while he stared menacingly at Brandon.

“Hey,” I said to Nick, who immediately turned back to me. “How are you?”

“I’m good, I’m good, honey,” Nick replied. “How you doin’, sweetheart?” He was born and raised in Brooklyn, with the kind of old-school New York accent that made De Niro look like a phony. “Who’s this fella?”

I shook my head. “Just a friend, Nick. This is Brandon Sterling. We work together in Boston.”

Nick regarded Brandon with a raised brow, and I noticed the way the thick muscles of his forearms flexed just a little bit harder as he polished his glass. He was one of those men who could make any number of kitchen chores look like a threat.

“Friend, huh?” he asked Brandon, who only sat there, stone-faced. I recognized the look. It was the look certain types of men get when they’re not willing to give first.

“Friend,” Brandon repeated with hardened eyes and tightened jaw.

“I hope so, I hope so,” Nick said before turning back to me. “You got a minute, kid?”

Brandon frowned at me in concern, but I shook my head at him as I stood up. “Sure, Nick. I’ll just be a second,” I told Brandon before I followed Nick back to the bar, ignoring the blue daggers staring into my back.

“So listen, honey,” Nick said as he took his place behind the bar. He leaned over the top so his big face was closer to mine. “I don’t want to worry you, but I thought you should know.”

My stomach dropped at the words. There was only one issue that Nick would preface that way, and it was one I hoped was finished the last time I’d tried to take care of it. I stared at the bar top, tracing the lines of water stains with the tip of my finger.

“Is it Victor?” I asked quietly before looking back up.

Nick nodded, his deep-set eyes creased with pity. He clasped a big paw over mine and squeezed. “I’m sorry, honey. He’s been showin’ up to Danny’s gigs the last few weeks. I see them talkin’. I don’t know what’s going’ on, but I figure you oughta know.”

I squeezed back before pulling my hand back over my hair. I sighed. “No, you did right. I definitely needed to know that.”

“Anytime, honey. You want me to let you know if he keeps showin’ up?”

I frowned, weighing the offer. Victor Messina, the man in question, was a small-time loan shark and neighborhood thug

who was just big enough to be legitimately dangerous. It was bad enough that Dad was getting mixed up with him again. I didn't want to get Nick into trouble if the guy caught wind someone was watching him.

"No," I said. "That's okay. I'll check in with my dad first and see what's going on." I stood up from the stool and balanced on my tip-toes so I could lean over and give Nick a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks."

"Anytime, honey," he said again. "Don't be a stranger, you hear? And you let me know if blondie over there don't treat you like absolutely gold, okay? Only the best for you, baby girl."

I grinned and pushed off the bar. "You got it."

Nick winked and turned his back toward a new customer at the other end of the bar. I made my way back to where Brandon was sitting, still watching me intently.

"Everything all right?" he asked when I approached the table.

I reached down to grab my coat off my seat and started wrapping myself up for the cold. "It's fine. He's just an old family friend." It wasn't anything I could do anything about tonight anyway, even if I wanted to tell my new friend—is that what Brandon was now?—all about it. Which I didn't. At all.

Brandon cocked his head at me, obviously not buying it. When it was obvious I wasn't going to say anything more, he tossed back the rest of his drink and stood up too. I turned around to send a quick wave up at my dad, but he was completely lost in his music, eyes still shut as he purred into

the microphone. When I turned back to Brandon, he had bundled himself back up as well and was ready to go.

“Come on,” he said, holding out a gloved hand. “I said I’d walk you home. And it’s clearly past your bedtime. Mine too.”

I opened my mouth to protest, ready to launch an argument about being dictated to about my damn bedtime of all things. But Brandon’s expression, earnest and kind, stopped me before a word came out. The condescension or arrogance I had seen earlier that evening or in his office hadn’t made a single return since he’d admitted his idiocy earlier. This was that same look I’d seen that night in the snow. Only concern... and something else I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Something I suspected was in my expression too. So after a moment’s hesitation, I finally gave in. I put my hand in his and let him lead me out of the club.

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Chapter 10

“I can’t believe you would have walked home by yourself in this neighborhood.”

Brandon gazed around the street where I grew up, examining the battered shingles of some of the less maintained Victorian houses as if they were made of cardboard and scrap metal. We were only a short walk from the club, just a few blocks off Coney Island Avenue, but this part of Brooklyn was completely suburban. Six-story walk-ups and traffic signals morphed into gated single-family homes on tree-lined streets, complete with the occasional station wagon parked out front.

I looked around, trying to see the danger he saw in a place that could never be anything but familiar. It was cold, but with my hands shoved deep into my pockets, combined with the brisk walk home, I could hardly feel the freezing weather.

“Yeah, all of these craftsman houses and minivans pose a real threat,” I replied. “Come on, you can’t possibly think this is a bad neighborhood. Not compared to the South end of Boston.”

In response I received a grim look.

“It’s completely empty,” Brandon replied. “Anyone could creep up on you, and there’d be no one to help. You say grew up here in the city, but you don’t seem that street smart, Red.”

I shrugged. I did grow up in the city, and if anyone else treated these streets with such willful nonchalance, I’d probably be saying the same thing. I knew too many girls who had been mugged on a dark corner when they were walking

home alone—even one who had been raped in Prospect Park, which wasn't exactly a terrible neighborhood.

“Okay, so maybe you're right,” I conceded. “But this is home. I'll never be that scared here. Not when I know exactly which way to run and keep my hand on my pepper spray.” I pulled my house keys from my messenger bag and dangled the small bottle hanging from my keychain. Stubbornly I omitted the fact that I likely would have taken a cab anyway if he hadn't insisted on walking me home. I wasn't ready to admit the reason why I might have allowed for that to happen.

I could feel, rather than see Brandon's disapproving glare as I stuffed the keys back into my pocket.

“Don't even joke about that, Skylar,” he said a little too sharply.

The “r” on my name disappeared again, this time more overtly, and I tried not to smile.

“You're small and sweet. I'd hate to think what might happen—” Quickly, he cut himself off, took a deep breath.

I peered curiously at him to see his expression, but he had turned his face away as he shoved his hands hard into his pockets. Okay, I was short, it was true, but not men had called me a lot of things in my life, and sweet wasn't one of them. If I had a dollar for every time Bubbe had told me that my sharp tongue was going to cut a man down before he could kneel for himself, I'd never have to pay for the subway again.

“I want to say I'm sorry. Again. About, you know, what happened.”

The abrupt change of subject pulled me out of my thoughts. I blinked. “Yeah. Oh...kay. But...I still don’t understand why you thought you had to approach me like that. You said you’ve only dated a few people since...ah...your last relationship.” I paused, mulling over my thoughts and flexing my gloved fingers as we walked. “I guess...I’m not really buying it. That you just didn’t know how else to go about it. You don’t seem that stupid.”

Brandon jerked to a stop, and immediately I wondered if my sharp tongue had gotten me in trouble yet again. I hadn’t cared about that before, but now something had changed. Somehow over the course of the last few hours, I had come to believe there was a lot more behind that slick facade.

He gave me a wry smile, then grimaced. “I think so. All right, then. I wasn’t lying before. My last relationship—my only serious one, actually—ended badly, and she was after... well...you know. The truth is, I’m complete shit when it comes to dating and women.”

“I don’t believe that for a second,” I interrupted him.

Brandon chewed his lip for a moment while he looked at me, measuring his own thoughts. “I...” he started again. “Why do I have the feeling like you’d see through any bullshit besides the absolute truth?”

“Well, look at you. You’re basically Brad Pitt, for Christ’s sake.”

He gave me a sly grin that made my insides flip. “You think I’m handsome, Red?”

I rolled my eyes and started walking again. “Don’t let it go to your head, pretty boy. I’m just pointing out the obvious, which you clearly know. You’re rich, you’re good-looking—yeah, I bet that makes it super hard for you to find women to date.”

“Well, like I said, that’s not always a good thing.” He huffed beside me and kicked a rock aside off the pavement. “I also wasn’t lying when I said I don’t really have any time to get to know someone. Between the firm, and Ventures about to go public—”

“Sterling Ventures is going public?” I interrupted him again, this time in shock. This was major news, and it was probably illegal that he was even telling me.

He darted a quick warning glance at me and shoved his hands into his pockets. “Ah, yeah. That’s privileged information, Skylar. Really, you can’t tell *anyone*, or we could both be in major trouble.”

I nodded solemnly and gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry. You have your interns all sign NDA forms regarding company information anyway. If I breathe a word, you can just sue me.”

He shrugged again, but I could tell he relaxed at the reminder.

“I still shouldn’t have said anything, but you...” He gave me that same sheepish smile, which I found made me want to wrap my arms around his neck. The butterflies in my belly sped up a little more. “You seem to have that effect on me. Getting me to say things I shouldn’t.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

He darted another sideways glance at me. “I’m not sure. I’ve already made a fool out of myself twice with you. I guess...I thought it would be simpler, somehow, if I tried to keep it just to sex.” He smacked himself on the head and grinned sheepishly. “Idiot, right? Obviously someone like you isn’t going to go for a ridiculous suggestion like that.”

I didn’t feel the need to remind him just how close I had come to giving in to his proposal. I remembered all too well the feel of his solid hands around my waist, the warm texture of his mouth on mine. I shook my head. He didn’t need to know how easy it was for me to go to that place with him.

“Is that usually how you approach women?” I prodded him instead. “Propositioning them in your office? Suggesting standing sex appointments and real estate perks?”

He was gorgeous and rich; I had no illusion as to how many women might have been served tea in front of his fireplace. Suddenly, the thought of that prospect sent my stomach rolling.

“Ah, no,” he said a little too loudly, suddenly preoccupied with clearing his throat. “Which is probably why it went so god-awful terrible.”

Without a hat, his ears were tinged pink in the cold, but I thought they reddened even more.

“It doesn’t happen a lot, but when it does, it’s usually more of a spontaneous accompaniment home from an event sort of thing.” He sighed. “I have to go to a lot of those things. They’re really boring.”

I nodded, but didn't say anything. I had little experience, but getting all dressed up to go to a glamorous benefit didn't sound like a terrible Friday night. Especially if you had a happy ending waiting for you afterward. Suddenly the image I had in my head of Brandon in a tux morphed straight into me taking it off him. The shoulders that strained against the seams of his overcoat couldn't look anything but phenomenal without anything covering them. Except maybe me, hoisted over one. Ugh, there went my stomach again, flipping all over the place.

We continued to walk another block lost in our individual thoughts (mine a bit more salacious than expected), our footsteps crunching loudly on the salt-covered sidewalk. Although a car would occasionally rumble by and the buses could be heard screeching a few blocks away, we were, for the most part, alone as we walked between the mounds of snow piled up on both sides of the sidewalk from shovels and snowplows, encasing us in cold, white tunnels.

A sneaky patch of black ice caused me to lose my footing. As I started to fall backward, Sterling shot out a quick hand and caught me by the elbow, yanking me upright again and catching me with both arms so that we were suddenly face-to-face. He peered down at me, close enough that I could smell the sweet, minty flavor of his breath, tinged slightly with brandy. He sucked in a bit of frigid air and exhaled slowly through his nose. I, on the other hand, found it hard to breathe at all. His eyes shot down to look at my top lip, clenched in between my teeth. He inhaled again, sharply.

Just as he started to lean down closer, we were interrupted by the rumble and exhaust of a delivery truck as it passed by,

accompanied by a loud whistle out its passenger window.

“Take her home, Romeo!” called out its occupant.

Thankful that Brandon couldn't see my reddened cheeks in the dim light, I hastily stepped out of his embrace with an awkward mumble of thanks. He watched me for a moment and sighed, but stepped close beside as we started to walk again. When his hand brushed against mine, he captured it quickly and tucked it into his pocket along with his as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do.

“So your dad,” he said. “He's younger than I would have thought.”

I nodded, trying to ignore the way his fingers were curled around mine, the pad of his thumb brushing gently against my inner palm. I should have pulled my hand away. Should have, but didn't.

“Yeah,” I replied slowly, suddenly finding it a bit more difficult to articulate my words. “He and my mom had me young. Like, high school young.”

“Was he a good dad?”

I sighed, more out of contentment. Thinking about Dad always made me feel that way. I adored him; there wasn't any adequate way of expressing how grateful I was that he was my father.

“He was—he is—the best,” I said emphatically. “I mean, he couldn't be there all the time because he worked two jobs to support me and my grandmother, but when he came home in the evenings, before he'd go out to perform, that was our time. He was always game for a hug, always made sure to be there

to put me to bed. He taught me how to stand up for myself and always made me feel loved. I never felt like I was missing anything with him...not for a long time, anyway.”

“What happened to your mom?”

I frowned. I didn't particularly like talking about Janette Jadot nee Chambers, but that was because I tried not to waste time thinking about her. I had no idea what she looked like now, but in my mind I saw the same person who had last visited me when I was twelve: a tall, slim woman with dark hair, a turned up nose, and the big green eyes I'd inherited. She was friendly, vivacious, and loved to laugh. She was also a complete flake.

“She took off about a year after I was born,” I said shortly. “She and my dad were never married, so that made things easier. To leave, I mean. She came from...well, she came from money.”

He didn't respond, waiting patiently for me to fill in the gaps. I realized then I hadn't ever really told this entire story to anyone, not even Jane, who had mostly deduced it on her own. It was embarrassing to admit that your own mother didn't want you.

I sighed. “Why do I have the feeling like you'd see through any bullshit besides the absolute truth?” I repeated softly.

Brandon chuckled and squeezed my hand tighter inside his pocket. “Trust me, Red, I'm no one to judge your shitty mom. I ended up in a group home after mine fell off the wagon a few, oh, dozen too many times. So it's fine. You tell me what

you want, or just say you don't want to." He turned his head to peer down at me. "We all have a few secrets, right?"

I pursed my lips and blew a breath out slowly, watching it plume white against the night air. "It's fine. It's not a secret—thinking about her is just a waste of time."

He didn't respond, just waited patiently as I decided what parts of the story to tell.

"She and my dad met at the School of Performing Arts. She's an 'artist'." I held up my free hand to mime quotation marks around the word, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "She does mostly these ridiculous installations with a collective she started in Paris. Man Ray style stuff, if you know who that is. Like, hanging strings of glue all over someone's office to insinuate the constrained web of capitalism."

I rolled my eyes at the thought. That particular stunt had ended her first marriage, considering the office belonged to her husband's boss and cost him his job. I only heard about it when my stepfather called to inform me he would no longer be in my life. I had only met him a handful of times, so I figured the call was mostly for his own sense of guilt than for my feelings. I kicked a hard tuft of snow, which exploded against my boot.

"Anyway," I continued. "She left way before that. She said she hadn't earned the right to be my mother. That she needed to find her path in life before she could lead me down mine. That's what her letter said, anyway."

I looked up, and was surprised to find obvious anger marring Brandon's kind features, rather than the pity most

people exuded when they discovered I had grown up without a mother.

“When was that?” he asked tightly.

“I was four when she wrote that letter.”

“There were more?”

I snorted. “I’ve got a shoebox full of them. Let’s just say my dad was kind of her rebound every time a relationship—or maybe her latest marriage—ended. It took him a while to stop taking her back, and every time, she’d send me a little apology note for leaving. Or for missing my birthday. Forgetting Christmas. You get the picture.”

My faced twisted into the familiar expression of disgust that I felt every time I recalled the cardboard box filled with those stupid letters, still sitting under my childhood bed. Some of them were written on hotel stationary—usually from some place swanky, like the Waldorf or the Plaza—but most of them were scribbled on her own personal stationary, engraved with swooping cursive initials at the top of each page. After she moved to France, they were peppered with French idioms for a while until eventually they just stopped. The last one, sent just after I graduated high school, contained a bank account number and the legal documents for my trust fund, which I had only ever used to pay for school. I’d considered tearing that one up, but in the end I decided not to force my dad into debt over my education. I figured she owed me—and him—that much.

I was twelve when he turned her away for good. She had smiled at me awkwardly from the living room by way of greeting, but it wasn’t until she offered to put Bubbe and me

up at a hotel for a week so she and my dad could be reacquainted that he tossed her right back out and told her not to come back unless she wanted to see *me*. So she didn't. Not when I graduated the valedictorian of my high school class or cum laude from NYU. Not when I celebrated any of my birthdays. And definitely not when I was studying abroad in France, just a short train ride from the Parisian suburb where she had lived in with her fifth husband and their two kids since I was sixteen. But I always got her letters.

“What a bitch,” Brandon pronounced, enunciating each word carefully as the anger gradually dissipated from his face. “I’m sorry, but there’s really no other way to say it. You’re lucky you have your dad.”

“I am,” I agreed, although my stomach dropped a little thinking of Nick’s comments at the bar. “Plus there was Bubbe, too. We went to live with her, at this house, and together...I don’t know. I would get a little jealous from time to time when my friends would have their moms cook them dinner and pick them up from school, but honestly I got just as many hugs, and Bubbe made just as many meals. I had a good home.”

He smiled, and squeezed my hand in his pocket. “Bubbe. You’re Jewish, then?”

I shook my head, laughing. “Not really. Bubbe attends synagogue and sometimes my dad and I take her on special days, but that’s it. My mother’s not Jewish, so to a lot of Conservatives, technically I’m not either.”

“So, do you know where your mom is now? Is she still hanging glue in people’s offices?”

I chuckled. “Not that I know of, although I think she does still make installations. She lives outside of Paris, with her fifth husband and their two kids.”

It was hard to talk about her new family without that familiar ache in my chest. For so long it had seemed like she just wasn't the family type, that my dad and I had nothing to do with her issues with commitment and devil-may-care approach to relationships. But she had been with Maurice Jadot for almost a decade. If Christmas cards were any indication, they were extremely happy.

“Do you talk to her much now?”

I darted a sharp look his way. Why was he so interested in my relationship with Janette?

“Like I said, no,” I said, maybe a little too sharply. “But my dad and Bubbe was and are all the family I need.”

I was being defensive, but I couldn't help it. Years of unwelcome pity for the little girl without a mommy did that to a person. People started to look for the things that were wrong with me when they found out. They searched for my scars. But when I looked back at Brandon, there was no pity in his eyes, only acknowledgement of what I'd said.

“Of course,” he said softly. “But then again, you don't seem that hard to love. That's why...I suppose that's the real reason I made such an ass of myself.”

I gulped, my heart stopping in my chest. “Because you *love me?*” That was even crazier than I'd thought.

“No. No! Jesus, here I go again, right?” He pulled our hands from his pocket and shook mine back and forth, as if to

force me out of the obvious daze the word “love” had cause. “Skylar, *no*. That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?” I asked, ignoring the drop in my chest and the emphasis on the word “no.” What was going on with me?

“I just meant...” he stared up at the city-lit sky, covered in its usual halo from the streetlights and buildings that blocked the stars beyond. He grabbed my other hand and pulled me to face him again. “I just meant that you’re special, all right? That much has been clear, since the second I saw you. And it makes me...I didn’t know how to react to it. What do you do when just the look of someone renders you completely and totally awestruck?”

His words made my breath catch in my throat, and I was relieved that when I looked to the side, I found the familiar drooping eaves of the old house that would always be home. Somehow its comforting presence absolved me of a direct response.

I pulled my hands reluctantly from his grasp and gestured toward the house beyond the weather-worn, chain-linked fence. “Here’s the castle. Chez Crosby, if you will.”

The two-story Victorian wasn’t anything impressive. The dark brown paint hadn’t been resealed in my lifetime, causing it to flake in several spots. The front door had swollen after some flooding last spring, so it stuck when opened and closed unless you pushed with your whole body. The lawn, small and currently covered with snow, was bound by the simple chain-link fence and a faded black mailbox perched crookedly at the entry gate.

Brandon surveyed the property curiously. “It’s nice.”

I shrugged. “It’s no mansion on the Commons, but it’s home.”

“It looks more like a home than any mansion,” he said with a small smile, and maybe even a trace of envy? Then his gaze shifted to me and we both seemed to stop breathing for another several seconds.

“I don’t know what it is about you, Red,” he said, his voice cutting roughly through the silent night air. “Maybe it’s your seriousness. Maybe it’s your hair. Maybe it’s the way you sing or maybe it’s the way you don’t take any of my shit. But when I’m around you...it’s like there’s no more Brandon Sterling, CEO any more. There’s just me. And there’s just you. Am I wrong?”

I opened my mouth and closed it again. He wasn’t wrong, but I couldn’t quite find the words to say it. The truth of it scared me too much.

“I think there’s something here,” he muttered gruffly. “Something that I...that I think I have to make time for it.” He paused. “Am I crazy? You have to tell me.”

“Maybe a little,” I said back, no sense of joke in my voice.

His eyes searched mine in earnest as he moved one step closer to me. “But...you feel it too?”

There was no use pretending I didn’t. I didn’t understand the attraction, didn’t know what had caused this man to follow me all the way to New York just to make sure I got home safe. I didn’t understand why my tongue felt about two sizes too big

for my mouth when I looked at him or why I didn't want it to stop either. But somehow, in just the space of a few hours, a few layers had been shed, and it was clear to me that the idiot in his office, the smart ass on the street, they weren't the real Brandon Sterling. The guy who cared enough to escort me home, who listened raptly when I talked about myself, who spoke vehemently in my defense, and who offered his home to stranger on a cold, snowy night—that guy was the real Brandon Sterling. He was kind, slightly awkward, and intensely generous. And he was someone I wanted—no, *needed* to know.

“Yes,” I whispered, unable to summon my normal voice. “I feel it.”

Slowly he removed his gloves from his hands and put them in his pocket. He placed his palms gently on my cheeks, framing my face and forcing me to look up at him.

“So it is real,” he murmured as he brushed his thumbs lightly over my cheekbones. “Skylar, do you mind if I kiss you right now?”

I blew a pale breath through pursed lips as I shook my head wordlessly. There was nothing to say as he bent down to brush his lips lightly over mine. He looked at me as if uncertain whether or not I would allow him to continue. In response, I wrapped my arms around his taut waist and tugged him to me, lifting my mouth to meet his once again.

He wanted to be gentle, but it only took a few seconds for his hands to cup my head securely at the neck and pull me deeper, teasing my mouth open so that he could twist his tongue sweetly with mine. This kiss didn't have the same fury

as the one in his office, but it was more potent. I relished in the slow, tentative strokes of his tongue, luxuriating in the taste of him. I pulled him closer, wanting more.

When Brandon finally released me with a nip on my upper lip, we were both gasping, our breath dancing around us in disappearing clouds. He grinned.

“So,” he said. “Dinner next Friday?”

Apparently the cocksure guy wasn't completely gone. I blushed, already feeling like a foregone conclusion, but not caring in the slightest at this point.

“I thought you didn't have time for that sort of thing,” I murmured as I tugged a bit on his jacket.

“I'll make time,” he said, and leaned in for another brief kiss. “Like I said, I have to. I'll pick you up at your place at eight. Wear a dress.”

“Planning something fancy?” I teased.

He just smiled, his eyes suddenly full of heat that belied the cold weather. “No,” he said. “You just have great legs.”

Without breaking his gaze, he lifted my hand up and pressed his lips, still warm from our kiss, firmly against the interior of my palm.

“Good night, Skylar,” he said solemnly. “And please stay safe. Don't go walking down any dark streets by yourself, all right?”

He watched from the sidewalk as I let myself into the house, then gave a slight wave before turning to walk back down the street. I shut the door quietly behind me and released

the long, deep sigh I hadn't known I'd been holding. It was going to be a long time until Friday.

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Chapter 11

The weekend was far too short as always, but I was able to enjoy a few carefree days with my dad and Bubbe, playing board games while it snowed on Saturday and eating Bubbe's stuffed cabbage before Dad's gig. Throughout, however, the conversation with Nick lingered in the back of my mind.

To his credit, Dad didn't ask about Brandon, but that wasn't unusual. I had dated so few men seriously, and I had brought friends to his gigs before. I didn't want to tell him that his initial instinct was right, that I had possibly met someone special. I wasn't sure what that meant anyway. Not yet.

"Now, Skylar, are you sure you don't want me to pack you some cabbage for tomorrow too? We have plenty leftover," my grandmother said on Sunday morning, her short, squat frame positioned at the stove while she stirred a pan full of onions and eggs. A large blintz cooked in the oven. As was her usual routine, she had taken my visit as an excuse to stuff her family silly with various comfort foods. I was going to have to roll myself back to Boston.

"You're too skinny, girl, look at you. Daniel, will you look at her? Like a twig, this one. What kind of man is going to want a girl with hips like a little boy?"

She clicked her tongue a few times, and Dad winked at me over his morning paper before he dropped one hand down to grab his coffee. I was reading the finance section, the one part of the paper my dad didn't read, while he leafed through the Op-Eds.

It was a familiar scene, the kind that made me wish I could stay longer just to soak in the ease of it all. Bubbe, all tight gray curls and friendly admonishments through a thick Brooklyn accent, Dad, with his feigned apathy and late morning coffee after an even later gig the night before, and me, dodging comments about my weight and the men in my life. The typical Crosby household.

“Ma, be nice,” Dad muttered absently over his pages. “Pips, don’t listen to her. You’re gorgeous, and don’t let anyone else try to tell you otherwise. She’s gorgeous, Ma, you got it?”

Bubbe tugged the blintz out from the oven, engulfing the small room with the scent of sweet pastry, and set it on the table with the eggs. She skittered back to grab our dishes and cutlery, and Dad and I both folded away our papers so we could eat.

“Of course she’s beautiful, Daniel. Did I say she wasn’t?” Bubbe leaned over and pecked me on the cheek, no doubt leaving a brownish-red stain I couldn’t dare wipe off while she was looking.

“No, you didn’t say that, Ma,” Dad replied as he set the paper down on the table and stood up. “Pips, is your bag packed? I’m going into the city, so I can give you a ride to Grand Central. I’ll just throw it into the car before I forget.”

The clatter of a dropped spatula cracked through the friendly conversation. We both looked up to find my normally coordinated grandmother frantically scooping splattered eggs off the stained linoleum floor.

“You all right, Ma?” Dad asked as he walked over to help her stand up.

She batted away his hands and tossed the paper towels into the garbage next to the sink. “Sure, I’m fine, I’m fine. Just clumsy. Go pack up the car. I’ll take care of this.”

Dad backed out of the room, his hands raised. “You’re the boss.”

Bubble finished cleaning up the floor, then marched over to sit next to me at the table, fresh spatula in hand.

“You are gorgeous, sweetheart,” she said with a warm rub on my back. “Just need a little more meat on these bones. Here, this’ll help.” She scooped me a large portion of eggs and cut a huge slice of blintz.

“Bubbe, that’s too much!” I protested.

She waved away my concerns with a manicured hand and proceeded to serve herself a substantially smaller portion. She scooted her chair closer to me and bent in, checking quickly behind her as my Dad bounded out the front door with my bag.

“Before he comes back,” she said in a low voice. “I found some tickets in his pants the other week while I was doing the laundry. Stubs from the track.”

She scooted back to her place and calmly picked up her fork, satisfied that she had met her moral obligation in telling me about the tickets. My stomach, however, now wouldn’t let me eat a thing.

I held my fork in my hand, tines hovering over the steaming food on my plate, which now looked about as attractive as the contents of our garbage pail. “Are you sure

they were from the track? Not movie tickets or something else?”

In return I received a look of pure disdain the way only my grandmother knew how to give. “What do I look like, a fool? I may be an old woman, but I know the difference between a ticket for that superhero what’s his face and a bet on a horse.” She bent back down to take another bite of her blintz. “I *was* married to your grandfather after all.”

I sighed and pushed my fork through the mounds of food on my plate. It wasn’t talked about much, but I had pieced together the stories of how my grandfather had been forced to resort to petty crime to resolve some of his gambling debt. The house we lived in had only been saved from foreclosure when Bubbe had collected his life insurance premium. No one ever said it directly, but it wasn’t one hundred percent clear that his death by drowning in the East River wasn’t an accident, although I wasn’t totally sure if that meant suicide or something more sinister.

Despite all of that, it quickly became evident that a weakness for gambling ran in the family. The last time my dad had gotten into trouble, it had cost Dad a few black eyes, Bubbe and me some major headaches, and about fifty thousand dollars out of my trust fund to pay off Victor Messina and finance Dad’s three-month stint in a rehabilitation center.

And now it looked like we were facing that road again. Damn.

“I’ll talk to him,” I said quietly, and Bubbe nodded as Dad strode back in. He took his seat and accepted massive plate of

food from his mother.

“Everything all right in here?” he asked. “You two are unusually quiet.”

“I’m still trying to get your daughter to eat,” Bubbe said without looking up from her food.

“Bubbe, I’m not this hungry. Really.”

“You need to eat,” she said as she pushed my plate toward me a bit more. “Especially if you’re going to impress that young man again.”

I jerked my head next to me to look at my dad, who simply pressed his lips together and took a sip of coffee while avoiding my gaze.

“He told me everything, Skylar,” Bubbe said, patting my hand. “What a doll, escorting you home like that. A real gentleman.”

“I can’t believe you told,” I grumbled at Dad, who shrugged and mouthed “Sorry” to me before taking a large bite of eggs.

A bike messenger had delivered a first class ticket to New York yesterday morning while I was out for a jog, providing the means to get back to Boston by train instead of bus. It was no mystery who had sent it, which must have prompted the discussion of Brandon between my dad and grandmother.

“I even looked him up on the online,” she informed me proudly.

I pressured my mouth into a firm line at her misspeak; trying to correct Bubbe on technological jargon was like trying

to teach a cat to ride a bike.

“Goyish, of course,” she continued, “with that blond hair and those blue eyes, but still, very handsome. I had hoped, of course, that you might marry a nice Jewish boy, but still, this Mr. Sterling looks very nice too.”

“Would nice mean rich?” I asked slyly, acting as though I was about to poke her with my fork. She batted it away.

“Eat,” she ordered again with an imperious point of her finger. “And of course not, Skylar, but it’s not a bad thing that a man has enough to take care of his family. You would have nothing to worry about, you wouldn’t even have to work.”

“Bubbe,” I chided her gently. “I’m not going to law school to become a housewife.”

“And is that the worst thing in the world?” she asked. “To take care of your home and family?”

“Ma,” my dad said with a rare sharp tone that generally stopped Bubbe’s tirades. “Stop. This generation is different than yours. We should be proud of Skylar that she’s doing so much with her life. She don’t need a man to take care of her because she can do it herself.” He reached a hand over and squeezed my shoulder. “I’m proud of you, Pips.” He grinned and then bent down to take a large bite of blintz.

I quickly took a few bites to appease my demanding grandmother while the conversation turned toward the latest gossip at temple. Thoughts of impeding classes loomed in my mind, as did the conversation I’d have to have with my father before my train.

“I need to finish getting ready. I promise, Bubbe, I’m stuffed,” I said, leaning around to give her a peck on the cheek after I stood up. “But I couldn’t eat as much of anyone else’s cooking, I swear. Pack me some more for the train, all right?”

~

The door to my room creaked open just as I finished stripping the sheets off my bed. I threw the last pillow case into the pile by my desk and looked up to find Dad in the doorway.

“Hey, Pop,” I said, sitting down on the naked mattress. He walked inside and took a seat next to me, looking all around as if he hadn’t been up there a million other times.

“You know,” he said, “I never come up here anymore. I forget how it looks sometimes.”

It was an attic room that had never been completely finished, with one of the walls still gaping with exposed studs and a few electrical wires. The others had been dry walled but never sanded, and one of Bubbe’s old oriental rugs covered the thick subfloor that had never been carpeted. I had moved up there when I was just a kid, preferring the space and quiet of the attic to the tiny, finished room wedged between Dad’s and grandmother’s. Over the years, I had made the attic feel friendly by hanging faded tapestries over the insulation and Christmas lights from the vaulted rafters. The other walls still boasted various decorations I had hung in college: a few concert posters and some street art I’d picked up in Paris. It wasn’t posh by any means, but it had always been mine.

“Does it look different?” I asked.

Dad shrugged, his small shoulders rising and falling with a pause in between the movements. “No. It’s just strange to think I could forget what my kid’s room looks like.” He sighed. “I guess I just miss you, kid.”

I leaned over to lay my head on his flannel-covered shoulder. “I miss you too, Dad. I’m sorry I don’t get back so often these days.”

“You’re busy.”

The sadness in his voice was obvious, and a pang of guilt shot through me. I sat up.

“Dad?” I asked, turning to face him. “Are you okay?”

He frowned, the movement shaking the floppy locks over his brow. “Yeah, Pips, why do you ask?”

I pulled nervously on one of the buttons on the mattress. “It’s just...well, Bubbe said you’ve been going to the track again.”

“Oh, that’s nothin’, sweetheart. Just hanging out with some of the guys. You know how they like to watch the horses.”

I clenched my teeth when his eyes flickered nervously around the room. He was always a terrible liar.

“Yeah,” I pressed, “but Nick mentioned that Victor’s been coming around the bar sometimes too.”

Dad seemed to shrink a little at the mention of the name, but he didn’t say anything, just toyed with one of the mattress buttons by his leg.

“Dad,” I said, trying to be gentler than I felt. “Do you need help? I thought I gave him what he needed last time, didn’t I? Or are you into something new?”

It had been three years since I’d had to deliver a thick envelope of cash to an unmarked office in the Navy Yard in exchange for a promise to leave my dad alone. Dad had run around with these guys, getting into trouble when they were kids, which was why they had been originally willing to let him pay off his debts by doing unsavory tasks for them around the neighborhood. It had taken several months of it until he almost got fired from his real job for missing his pickups too many times. Once I’d found out what was going on, I’d paid off Messina without a second thought and pushed Dad straight into rehab. He’d had been straight ever since. Or so I’d thought.

“Yeah, well, it’s a funny thing, sweetheart,” Dad whispered beside me. His long fingers—the ones that made such beautiful music, tapped out a silent melody on the mattress top. “These guys, you know them. They’re always needing a little something more.”

“Dad...” I started slowly, measuring my words. We’d had this conversation many times before, to no avail. “You don’t have to stay here. Whatever you owe, I can just give it to them, and you can come live with me in Boston. You can get away from all of this.”

“Pips, I can’t just leave your grandmother. Plus, I’ve got four years left until I make pension, and my band is here. I’m not leaving New York, kid. You know that.”

“But Dad—”

“Skylar, it’s *fine*,” he said, clearly forcing himself to meet my eyes. “It’s nothing to worry about. It’s done. He just asked me if I could look into something for him—you know they’re always interested in government employees. I said I couldn’t do it, and he said okay. I don’t owe him anything, I promise.”

“Yeah, but Bubbe and Nick said—”

“Pips, your grandma gets so far into other people’s business she has to make it up as she goes, and Nick’s a paranoid alcoholic who’s scared of his own shadow. That ticket was just a friend’s, Skylar. They don’t know what they’re talking about.”

I couldn’t stop the giggle from escaping. Nick, a hulking barrel of a man, wasn’t exactly a scaredy-cat. Dad slung a thin arm around me and pulled me into his side. I sighed contentedly at the familiar scent of clove cigarettes and coffee that permeated the soft flannel of his shirt.

“You don’t need to worry about me, kiddo,” he murmured into my hair. “That’s a promise. So you just need to get yourself back up to school and kick some ass, all right? That way you can defend your old man if I actually do get locked up one day.”

I could feel the press of his crooked smile against my forehead, but I didn’t find his weak joke the slightest bit funny. I sighed. There wasn’t much else I could do if he insisted everything was fine. He had promised me years ago those days were behind him, that he was out of the life for good. I wasn’t convinced, but I didn’t have anything else to go on either. And I wasn’t about to hand deliver an invitation for Victor Messina

and his thugs to come back into our lives, considering how hard it had been to get him out in the first place.

“All right, Dad,” I said, squeezing him tightly in response before sitting back up. “Just be careful, old man, will you?”

Don’t worry, baby. I always am.”

I smiled weakly and nodded. I wanted to believe him. I really did.

~

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Chapter 12

I arrived back in Boston early Sunday afternoon. The plush, first-class ride on the express train from Grand Central Station also gave me plenty of time and space to finish my preliminary reading before classes started. There was no signature on the card that accompanied the messengered ticket, but a typed note was paper-clipped to the envelope that read simply, “Be safe, Red.” It was only after I had opened the ticket that I realized Brandon and I hadn’t exchanged numbers. I had no way to say thank you, no way to confirm our plans—not unless I called his office line at Sterling Grove, and I had no intention of setting off water cooler gossip.

On Monday morning, I took my usual place in the front row of the in-class component of the Family Law Clinic. I was excited for this class—one of my final electives—because it was my best chance to decide once and for all if this was really the kind of law I wanted to practice, or if I was better suited to the full-service environment like Sterling Grove. Eric sat in the row behind me, tapping away on his phone after waving a brief hello. I wondered who he was talking to so early in morning.

When the professor strode in as the clock struck eight, my stomach fluttered with a bit of characteristic first-day jitters.

“Good morning, everyone,” he said.

The class was small, only fifteen or us or so, but big enough for an elective. I knew all of the third years, who made up half of the class and included Eric; we all sat up just a bit

straighter as Professor Ashe dropped his bag on the front table and set a stack of notes on the lectern.

“Welcome to your Family Law Clinic,” he said. “I know some of you; to those I don’t, welcome. In this class you’ll learn the skills and background necessary to participate in the clinic that accompanies the course. Orientation at the clinic is either directly after this class at one or tomorrow at eight AM, so please be on time in order to sign up for your scheduled hours.”

Professor Ashe continued to go over the basics of the class as he distributed the syllabus to everyone. It was no different than most of the electives: reading the cases, a midterm, a topical paper related to Family Law in Massachusetts, and a final that stood for most of the grade. Thanks to my luxurious train ride, I had already read several all of the cases for the first two weeks of class.

“Can anyone tell me the significance of *In re: Marriage of Ferguson*?” Professor Ashe asked, taking his place behind the lectern.

And so the class began, following a Socratic question and answer routine I had come to know well over the last two and a half years. When Professor Ashe finally released us, I was one of the first out the door, eager to get to the clinic in Jamaica Plain to have my pick of the hours.

~

“Someone is asking about you.”

Interrupted from my thoughts on the current status of welfare law in Massachusetts, I jerked my head around to find

Eric standing next to me, his hand wrapped in one of the stability straps above my seat on the train. He loomed over me, his groomed features twisted into a smirk.

“Oh, hey,” I said. “On your way to orientation too?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I’m doing another internship at the firm this semester too, so I need to make sure my hours at the clinic work with it.”

Regardless of what could definitely be termed his unprofessional behavior at work, I was happy for Eric that he had won one of the spots at the firm. Since his family made too much money, he hadn’t won any of the scholarships or grants available to HLS students, and a job like this would help him pay off his student loans in ten years rather than thirty. He was what Bubbe would have called a “go-getter,” and would undoubtedly hit the ground running at Sterling Grove, regardless of his tendency toward seducing the paralegals.

I followed his movements as he took the seat beside me, twisting my body so I could face him properly. “What do you mean, someone is asking about me? Someone at the firm, you mean?” Shit. Had Margie heard something she wasn’t supposed to? It felt like so much longer, but it had only been a week since I’d stormed out of Brandon’s office. Maybe I was water cooler gossip after all.

Eric’s smirk returned and his brown eyes twinkled. “Something like that. Ana keeps asking me weird questions about you.” His phone buzzed, and he pulled it out of his jacket pocket to look at the message. “Case in point. ‘Do you know if Skylar like boats?’” he read. He looked back to me,

one eyebrow arched knowingly. “Something tells me it’s not Ana who is concerned with your sea legs, Crosby, nice as they might be. Anything you want to say back?”

I blinked, trying to look as innocent as possible, but likely failing miserably. “Just tell her I’m a landlubber, since she apparently needs to know. How odd.”

He chuckled and typed back a quick reply. “Odd. Okay, then.” His phone buzzed again instantly. “Oops,” he said with a grin. “I guess I wasn’t supposed to tell you she was asking. So why is Sterling digging for your preferences?”

“Who says he’s the one digging?” I asked lamely.

“Give me a fucking break, Crosby,” Eric said. “Do I look like an idiot to you? Be honest. You hitting that?”

“Oh my god, *no!*” I protested hotly, feeling the flush rise up my cheeks. It was the truth, I told myself, but obviously Eric didn’t believe me. I scanned the car briefly to make sure no one was listening. It wouldn’t matter if my classmates had worked at Sterling Grove or not; everyone knew that firm, and an intern sleeping with the boss would be good gossip to anyone on campus. Luckily, we seemed to be the only HLS students in the car.

“Sure, sure, Crosby,” Eric said. “Well, if you’re not, looks like he wants to. Is that why you really refused a position at the firm?”

“No, no, it’s not,” I protested, gripping the bag on my lap until my knuckles turned white. I really was not enjoying this little interrogation. “I only just met the guy two weeks ago, you know that. We’ve talked maybe once since then.”

Right. Once while he polished my shoes in his living room. And then that time in his office where we almost ripped each other's clothes off before I came to my senses. And then that other time, where he walked me home all the way to New York City and met my father and gave me the best good night kiss I'd ever had. I shook my head vehemently, more to avoid getting sucked into that particular daydream again. Eric just laughed.

"I told Ben and Laura I wasn't planning to take a position about a week before I met him," I insisted.

Eric studied me closely, as if he were looking for some kind of flaw in my argument. I wasn't sure why it mattered so much, but I didn't want him thinking I had anything to do with Brandon Sterling in my professional life. After about a minute of watching me blush furiously under his gaze, Eric looked up when the T stopped and the conductor announced our destination.

"Whatever you say, Crosby," he said without much conviction as we filed off with the other passengers. His phone buzzed again, and he fell behind as he read his message. More than one of our classmates stepped off other cars; apparently we weren't the only ones who wanted first dibs on the schedule. I breathed a sigh of relief that they weren't there to overhear our conversation, and picked up my pace, hoping to catch one of them before I could be warned off Brandon by Eric.

"Hey Crosby!" Eric called as he jogged behind me.

I cringed, but finally turned my head, bracing myself for the inevitable "be careful about dating such a rich guy"

speech. Surrogate brothers came with some embarrassing caveats.

Instead, he just said, “Ana wanted to know if you eat red meat,” with a cheeky grin that showed off the dimples half the girls in our class (and a few guys too) talked about. It wasn’t any use, I realized. That was the thing about a surrogate brother. He’d call me on my shit just as much as I called him on his.

Slowly, I returned the grin, and slowed to let Eric catch up. “I’m as carnivorous as they come,” I said. “What else does she want to know?”

~

The clinic bore the unassuming name of Family Law Services, a small, single-floor office housed in a run-down brick building just off Washington Street. It was a collaboration between several HLS donors and the law school, centrally located in a part of the city where rent was reasonable and people needed the cheap legal advice. A far cry from the manicured lawns and white pillars of Harvard Square, Jamaica Plain was one of the parts of Boston that was gradually being gentrified, but was still home to a lot of pawn shops and bodegas. Evidence of this fact was the check cashing shop and expensive French bakery that sandwiched the offices of FLS. The mixed demographics of the neighborhood actually reminded me a lot of Flatbush, and I immediately felt home there.

The five of us who showed up for the afternoon orientation were quickly ushered into a small conference room

in the back of the offices, where we were told to wait until the director of the clinic could join us.

“I heard the she’s a hard ass,” whispered one of the other guys in our class. “I hope she’s not a giant bitch.”

Alex was a tall, brown-haired kid from Brookline who had attended Boston College before coming to Harvard. His father was one of the top-rated divorce attorneys in the city, and Alex was planning to join him at his firm. I wondered if he, like Eric, was only doing this because his dad was requiring him to gain a bit of litigation experience.

“You sound like an asshole,” I whispered back at him. “And regardless, the people who come into this clinic deserve to have a hard-ass defending them. All the better for us if she teaches us how to do it.”

Before Alex could twist his arrogant frown into some sort of retort, the door to the conference room flew open, and a tall, willowy woman with black hair, a razor sharp nose, and red lips pressed into an intolerant line purposefully strode in.

“First of all,” she said as she came to stand at the front of the conference table. “Let me say that just because this is a pro-bono and sliding scale clinic, you shouldn’t expect your level of professionalism to be pro-bono too. Anything even slightly below what you would demonstrate at a for-profit firm will not be tolerated, and you can kiss your clinic grade goodbye. These people need our help, and they are literally putting their lives in our hands. That deserves patience, diligence, and above all, respect.” She stared around the table and lingered on Alex, making me wonder if she had somehow heard our exchange. “Is that clear?”

We all nodded, and she glared at all of us before continuing.

“I’m Kieran Beckford,” she said, “the director of FLS. I’m also an equity partner at another firm. In other words, I’m *busy*, so the second rule here is that you should not bother me unless you absolutely have to. Got it?”

Again, we all nodded, and this time she looked down at the sign-in list on which we had all printed our names upon arrival.

“Today I’ll assign each of you to a volunteer attorney. You’ll need to arrange your scheduled hours with them, since most of them also have their own practices to worry about. Since you guys are the early birds, you have the privilege of getting first dibs. So, Christian Vegas?”

Christian, a small, unassuming kid with a weak chin, raised his hand. “Ah, here.”

“I’m not taking attendance,” said Kieran without looking up. “I’m assigning your mentor. You’ll be with Rodrigo Almodovar. He sits at the front desk. Eric Stallsmith?”

Eric waved his hand slightly and smiled. Kieran pursed her lips and did not smile back.

“You’re with Almodovar too.” She quickly assigned Alex and the other girl, Tina, before she looked at me. “Skylar Crosby?”

A flash of brief recognition passed over her sharp features, and suddenly I realized I knew her too. She was the woman with Brandon and the other two men who came into his house the night we met. She had not been happy to see me there. I

hoped it was because she was simply a curt personality and not because she thought something else was going on.

“That’s me,” I said maybe a little too loudly.

She blinked. “Right. You’ll be with me.”

My heart dropped into my stomach at the thought. This woman could make or break my job prospects at the end of this semester; if she thought I was the type of girl who screwed her boss, then I was the one about to be screwed.

“The rest of you, go meet with your mentors. Skylar, stay here.”

After my classmates filed out of the door, she paused a moment once it had closed behind them and turned to face me.

“You were at Brandon Sterling’s house two weeks ago.” It was a statement, not a question. Yep, she definitely recognized me.

I gulped and forced myself to meet her imperious gaze. “Yes.”

“Do you know him?”

I pressed my lips together. “No, not really. I was an intern at Sterling Grove last semester, but that night was the first time I’d seen him.” I couldn’t say it was the only time we’d met, but hopefully she didn’t catch that. “I was there with a friend of his housekeeper’s. She lives in the basement. I went upstairs to get cell service.”

“It didn’t look like you were on your phone. It looked like you were making yourself comfortable in his living room.”

I blanched, remembering how I had been perched cozily on the large pillow in his windowsill, my shoes resting on the carpet. Well, I had two options here. I could act appropriately contrite and admit guilt where there wasn't any. Or I could do what my instincts were telling me. If she was anything like the squads of hard-faced girls I knew back in Brooklyn, she was like a wolf, and it was important not to show fear. I shrugged and met her gaze directly.

"I live in student housing. And it's a comfortable living room." I prayed my gamble of being honest would pay off.

She narrowed her eyes briefly, evaluating my response. For a minute I thought she was going to tell me to get out, but then her pursed lips spread into an unlikely smile, and she nodded and barked out a short laugh.

"That it is," she chuckled. "Good for you. Well, come on, let's get to work. I've only got an hour today to get things squared away. And then you're on your own."

I followed her back into the main office, which was split into about ten cubicles shared by the volunteer lawyers. In the front was a small receptionist desk, behind which a few staff typed away at their desks. She led me on a quick tour of the cubicles, and then walked us into small office that was just off the receptionist area; a worn oak door with her name on the front marked its entrance.

"You can put your things there," she said, nodding to a small desk to the right of her larger one. It was a tiny office compared to the ones associates had at Sterling, but it was covered with marks of her pedigree—framed degrees from Duke and Harvard, a shelf full of plainly used local treatises

on family law, protective orders, and custody, another full of case files. A desk neatly organized with papers and notes.

“All right,” Kieran said, sitting down at her desk. “I’m here Wednesday afternoon and all day on Fridays. You should pick two four-hour slots to be here during regular working hours. What will it be? You have to be here with me at least one slot, but you’ll get more out of it if I’m here both.”

I chose to work on Wednesday and Friday afternoons, and she marked me neatly on her desk calendar.

“Right, then,” she said. “You’ll basically be doing a lot of my research and paperwork for several of the different cases we take on, and you’ll also meet with clients of your own. For instance, we’ve got an appointment today with a woman who is trying to claim domestic abuse against an emotionally abusive spouse while also filing for divorce. It’s nasty. The guy is obviously a sociopath, which makes this case that much more difficult. I’ve just taken her case pro bono—” She gestured to a thick envelope in front of me, “which means the first thing you’ll need to do is read through her file, then interview her, and then begin drafting a motion for protective order and for sanctions. Any questions?”

I accepted the file that she handed over her desk, and thumbed briefly through the documents. There were several court transcripts from previous hearings in the case, as well as a number of signed statements by multiple witnesses affirming the abuse in different forms, including a letter from a psychiatrist proclaiming the guy a sociopath. I looked up.

“One, if you have the time to answer it. What exactly do you mean by a sociopath?”

Kieran grimaced.

“A first-rate son of a bitch,” she said emphatically. “But obviously I can’t say that in court. No, it’s someone who doesn’t act with the logical notions of morality or social awareness. A Class-A narcissist, who is only concerned with his own wellbeing. Someone who takes great pleasure at playing games with other to bolster and protect his own ego, who gives gifts just to procure debts and to gain recognition. Someone who greatly enjoys lifting others up just to tear them down. These kinds of assholes usually start out sailing into a relationship like a white knight, making all sorts of grand gestures to vulnerable women. They proclaim their love, then start to take control because of it. In the end, they take everything she’s got and do whatever is necessary to break her down. And they hate to lose, which is why legal battles with them tend to be very expensive. This guy in particular—” she nodded at the file— “embezzled half of the woman’s 401K, and now they’re bankrupt because they’ve been in litigation for over a year. All they have left to haggle over are some properties that are damn close to being in default. It’s why she’s here instead of some place like Sterling Grove.”

I looked down at the file again, opening it on the table and starting to peruse its contents. It wasn’t the kind of case I’d expect to see here—this woman was well educated, a respected business woman before she’d gotten mixed up with this guy.

“You’ll learn a lot working here,” Kieran remarked as she pulled out another file for herself. “About your own life as well as theirs. Sometimes a man who comes off as a prince is really just the devil in disguise.”

She looked at me in a knowing way that I found disconcerting. Before I could reply, her phone rang. I ducked back into my file, suddenly engrossed by the story I held in my hands.

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Chapter 13

The apartment buzzer tore through the air at five minutes past eight. He was slightly late, but I only noticed because I had been ready to go for at least an hour. Before leaving for her own Friday night date with a Physics Ph.D. candidate she'd met at Great Scott, Jane had helped me come up with a plan of action for the first date in a long time that had made me legitimately nervous.

All he had told me was that we were going to dinner and to wear a dress. Beyond that, I had nothing to go on. Did I even have anything remotely appropriate in my wardrobe, which was primarily acquired from outlet malls and consignment shops? Could I wear boots and tights befitting the frigid weather, or was I expected to go for more of a sexy cocktail dress? His casual mention of frequenting events made me wonder if I was going to be escorted to some fancy function with the rest of Boston society (I really hoped not). Sometime in the last week he had stopped being Brandon again in my head, and had turned back into Brandon Sterling, CEO. Where did billionaires go on dates anyway?

In the end Jane and I had decided on a short-sleeved, knit black dress that hugged all the curves I had, from the flared knee-length hem all the way up to the wide scoop neck. I paired the dress with sheer black stockings and my favorite Manolo pumps, fresh back from the cobbler. Jane had tucked my unruly locks into hot rollers for fifteen minutes, and then teased them into sexy, voluminous waves that tumbled down my back. Once I had my contacts in and had touched up my

face with a bit of mascara and touch of lip gloss, I felt like I had completely eschewed my bookish law-student exterior in favor of a sex kitten I didn't know I had in me. Or at least that I hadn't seen in a very long time.

It still didn't stop my nerves from dancing around like maniacs in my belly for another hour after she left.

I hadn't heard from Brandon all week, so until that buzzer rang, I wasn't actually sure the date was for real. He knew my address from my resume, but I didn't release my private cell on job applications, using an internet-based number instead. In my nervous frustration, it hadn't occurred to me to check it. I wasn't sure I wanted to know that he had realized how nuts he was chasing someone like me—I hadn't quite come to terms with the fantasy.

So instead, I had spent the rest of the week burying myself in books, trying desperately to rid myself of the memory of him so I could focus on my last semester of school. It didn't work. His unique scent suddenly seemed present everywhere; the scent of a classmate snacking on almonds during my Postmodern Legal Theory seminar had me squeezing my legs together for the most of the three-hour meeting. Bumping into the firm back of a tall blond passenger on a crowded T car practically made my panties disintegrate. The more I tried not to think about Brandon Sterling, the more I did. And by this point, the only thing that was on my mind was the desire—no, the absolute craving—to feel his hands on me and his tongue on mine again.

And now, thank fucking God, he was here.

I pressed the speaker button next to the buzzer. “Yes?”

“Skylar, it’s Brandon. Will you let me up?”

I leaned my forehead against the wall momentarily in relief before answering. “Sure,” I said, and buzzed him in.

I opened the door and stood waiting as his steps lumbered up the stairwell at the end of the hall. The footsteps, heavy and urgent, grew closer, and my stomach clenched in anticipation. I was setting myself up for disappointment, I knew, but at this point all I couldn’t care less. He was finally here.

“Do you realize that we forgot to trade cell phone numbers?” he demanded as he strode into my apartment.

I closed the door and watched him peruse his iPhone contacts without even looking at me.

“All your intern file contains is a Google voice number which apparently you don’t check. I wanted to call this week to confirm our date, but I couldn’t. Shit, I wanted to let you know I was stuck in traffic just now, but I couldn’t!”

Immediately, I was glad I had gone with a more casual dress instead of something more formal. He looked good—amazing, actually—in tailored jeans, a light gray button-up shirt, a black skinny tie, and a leather bomber jacket. He clutched a wide black scarf and a pair of leather gloves in his hand, and his tousled blond hair was unruly and free from its normal confines, curling about his collar. My palms tensed with the desire to grab at it.

The catch of the lock clicking shut made him look up to find me standing against the door, my hands both wrapped around the knob behind me. A sly half-grin slowly spread over

his face as he looked me over. When his gaze returned to meet mine, he blew out a slow, uneven breath.

“Damn, Red,” he said purred. “I thought you were gorgeous before, but...wow.”

I ducked my head to hide the blush steadily rising up my cheeks. I heard the sound of his cell phone, scarf, and gloves being dropped on the kitchenette table, and before I could look up again, he was close enough that I could smell his aftershave, was inundated with that intoxicating blend of mint, almonds, and Brandon that had been driving me crazy with want for the last seven days. It was easy to forget just how big he was, but in close proximity, there was no escaping the size and his presence.

He drifted a finger over my jaw line and tipped my chin up so I had to look into his eyes, where I could almost perfectly see my own yearning reflected back at me. I swallowed as he moved in even closer, leaning down to follow his finger with his nose. My skin pebbled deliciously beneath his touch, set alight with goose pimples that had nothing to do with the chill outside.

“One week,” he murmured against my skin, “is too long to go without seeing you. I can’t do it again.” His finger down my neck and traced the edge of my neckline, skimming the edge of my collarbone lightly and causing my shoulders to shiver momentarily.

“Well, you probably need to take my number then,” I said, my voice unnecessarily breathy as he held me in his thrall. His nose, accompanied by the warm breath, the suggestion of his

mouth, moved up the edge of my jaw, nuzzling the soft skin below it as he went. I just barely stifled a small whimper.

“Oh, I’m going to need to take a lot more than that,” he rumbled against my ear before pressing his mouth into the skin just below it, causing me to quiver against the door and grasp at the doorknob more tightly to keep my balance. His lips were softer than I remembered, and involuntarily, I arched my neck into his face, urging him to do what, I wasn’t entirely sure. At this point, I didn’t really care.

“Say the word, Red.” He nipped the edge of my earlobe, and continued a path with his mouth to my jawbone. “I want to kiss you so badly right now, but I won’t if you don’t want me to.”

I couldn’t say that. That would be the biggest lie I’d ever told in my life. I wanted his kiss; Christ, I wanted a lot more than that—it suddenly didn’t matter that we hadn’t even had a real date yet. I pulled a newly urgent hand from behind me and pushed him away, watching with some satisfaction as a vein popped out from his neck as he tried not to fight the separation. He wanted to be close. I couldn’t agree more.

“I want you to kiss me,” I told him clearly.

He grunted and crashed his lips into mine, devouring me with all the urgency and longing that had been compounding over the course of the week. I slipped my fingers into his hair and yanked him even closer. His arms slipped down to grab me under the knees and hoist me up against the door as he pressed his growing hardness against me in the process. My legs immediately wrapped around his waist as I ground my

pelvis right back into him. *Wanton*, I thought, but I didn't care. He was completely intoxicating. I couldn't get close enough.

"Jesus, Skylar!" he bit out as he moved from my lips to nip my neck in between hurried breaths. "Fuck!"

"Yes, *that!*" I urged him on as he licked and nipped at my neck even harder before hurrying back to plunder my mouth. This wasn't a sweet kiss in the snow or a brief onslaught in his office. This was something else completely—all-consuming, no-holds-barred, straight-up *lust*.

Holding my backside tightly to keep me pressed against him, he pulled me off the door and carried me easily around the kitchen table and down the hallway toward the bedrooms

"Which one?" he demanded in between kisses, his hands gripping unforgivingly at my thighs. I grunted at the feel of them, eager to get off the flimsy fabric separating our skin.

"On the right," I said, gripping my hands in his hair even tighter and pulling his head back to my neck where he could continue that magic with his tongue. I'd be wearing turtlenecks for a week after this, but it was worth every second.

With a simultaneous yelp, we fell as one onto my small double bed, which I immediately noted was way too small for his large frame. He didn't seem to notice or care as he yanked me onto my back beneath him, preoccupied as he was with kissing down the edge of my collarbone and stretching the neck of my dress down so he could find the hollow between my breasts.

"Mmmphmm!"

I looked down my body, where he his mouth was doing excruciatingly delicious things to the delicate skin just above my bra.

“What was that?” I asked, barely able to speak in the way of his ministrations. He lifted his head, much to my disappointment, but the obvious desire in his eyes more than made up for the interruption.

“I said,” he replied hoarsely, “Take it off.”

It wasn't a request. My skin erupted in goose bumps again at the thought of him touching my bare skin—all of it. I leaned back and stared at the ceiling, willing the telltale flush I knew was rising over my skin to go away so I could summon the courage to strip in front of a man I hardly knew, a man, I realized, I was really starting to like.

He pulled us both back up to standing and watched with a carnal expression as I nervously reached down to clasp the hem of my dress. With my eyes closed, I peeled it off my body like a wrapper and let it drop to the floor, leaving me in nothing but my bra, underwear, stockings, and pumps. When I didn't immediately feel his warmth against me again, I opened my eyes and tilted my head up, praying I wouldn't see disappointment there. I knew I wasn't exactly bad to look at, but I had a feeling someone like Brandon Sterling didn't settle for just decent looking women. A man like this could probably have any woman he wanted.

“Everything okay?” I asked nervously. I still hadn't found the courage to meet his eyes. We hadn't even managed to turn on my bedroom light yet. With the light streaming behind his

dark form in long, bright rays, he looked more like a superhero than a Friday night date.

He had shucked his jacket, which was now hanging off one of my bedposts. He stood with one thumb hooked casually through a belt loop, his shirt charmingly untucked on one side and his tie flipped back over his shoulder. His hair was a disaster from having my hands gripping at it, but its disarray only added to his appeal.

“Christ, Skylar,” he said quietly, staring at me with intensity and an awe that I’d never seen when someone else had looked at me. Especially like this. “You are so goddamn beautiful, you know that?”

Finally, his stare became too much, and I started to look away, but he stepped closer and tilted my chin back up with a finger.

“Don’t,” he said kindly. “Take the compliment. You *are* gorgeous, and I am one lucky son of a bitch to get to see it. I feel like committing murder just to make sure there’s no one else left on the planet who’s had the privilege.”

I snorted. “Well, you wouldn’t have to kill too many people. There’s only been a few.”

“With any luck, there won’t be any others,” he said. Before I could wonder what he meant by that, he was walking me backward to the bed. “Lay down,” he ordered. “Put your arms above your head and clasp your hands together.”

Stifling another shiver that had nothing to do with being cold, I did as he said. My skin rose into goosebumps as his lips

kissed the bottom of my stomach along the lace edge of my underwear. Suddenly, I couldn't think anything at all.

“I want to make you feel good, Skylar. Better than you've ever felt before.” His voice thrummed against my skin, matching the cadence of his promise perfectly. “Will you let me?”

“O-okay,” I stammered hoarsely, unable to get out much more than that. I wanted to tell him I would do the same for him. I was a reasonably liberated woman; I believed that sex was an equal exchange, and I wasn't owed anything more because of my sex any more than he was. But no words came out as he trailed his mouth up my body until he was hovering over me and could once again capture my mouth with his own.

“Yessss,” he purred against my tongue. “Yes, you will.”

He moved up and over my body like a big cat over its prey, positioning himself so his shoulders blocked out the light streaming from the hallway. A broad hand ran up down one of my arms and up the other, grabbing my clasped hands and swiftly twisting me so that I was on my side, facing away from him. He settled himself behind me and pulled me tight against him so that my backside was firmly positioned against his hard length, clearly evident even through the coarse denim. He set his mouth again the crook of my shoulder and neck, nipping up and down my neck just enough to distract me from the way his other hand traveled around my waist and until it brushed over the rapidly moistening fabric of my panties. I felt like an instrument that was being played, and he knew exactly which places would make me sing.

“Tell me what you like, Skylar,” he said, his deep voice rumbling against my ear before he sucked my earlobe between his teeth and bit, gently.

“I like...that,” I said, finding it difficult to speak as his thumb brushed lightly over the edges of my panties and his fingers played with the elastic edges.

“You like what?”

I groaned, unable to think coherently enough to speak. “That. I...don’t know!”

“Do you want me to tell you what you like?” he asked in between nips at my earlobe. As he worried it gently in between his teeth, I couldn’t help but arch my body into his hand below.

“Yes.” I could barely speak, and he was hardly doing anything. The man obviously had some serious skills.

“You like it when I tease you through your panties? You’re getting so wet down here, baby.” His voice thrummed against my skin, and I could feel my hips moving into his hand, begging him to dip his fingers below the fabric and give me more.

“You want me to touch you, Skylar?” he asked before tracing the edge of my ear with his tongue. “Say it.”

It wasn’t a request.

“Touch me,” I said weakly, even while I was starting to twist about the bed. I couldn’t take this teasing much longer. “Please.”

In response, his finger obediently dipped below the elastic edge of my panties, parting the soft thatch of hair and gently exploring the warm folds beneath it. Gently, he worked one finger slowly in between my legs, finding the moist opening that was already aching for so much more of him to breach it.

“God damn, Skylar,” he purred as he continued to tease me, slipping the tip of two fingers into me for a split second. “You’re soaking here, baby. It makes me want to fuck you so badly. Would you like that?” He slipped them in again, this time to massage that very sensitive spot just inside, causing me to moan loudly and writhe against him. It was a good thing Jane was out. I hoped my classmates next door were also being social enough that they couldn’t hear me through the thin walls.

“Do it!” I urged him, only to become more frustrated when he pulled his fingers pulled out.

“Do what, gorgeous?”

I groaned. I always had a hard time talking during sex. It made me feel so awkward when all I wanted to do was relax into the feeling of his skin on mine, the sound his voice keeping me firmly ensconced in the thrill of the moment.

“Do you want me to fuck you, baby?” His deep voice purred against my neck, causing my breath to hitch as I writhed again against his extremely agile fingers. I was so close, so close...

“Yessss,” I moaned.

He stifled his own slight groan against my shoulder, pressed his erection against me through his pants and the

flimsy material of my underwear.

“God, you have no idea how much I want that, Red,” he grumbled against my shoulder. “But I can wait.”

He flipped me over so I was facing him and thrust his tongue deeply inside my mouth before I could respond. Both of his hands roved down below my underwear and gripped my bottom roughly, yanking me against his erection and kneading my skin so that the edges of his fingers eventually brushed against my opening from behind. He rolled me back so that he was on top of me again, kissing down the length of my body until his mouth was hot over the thin silk between my legs.

“Do you want me to taste you, Skylar?” he asked, his breath hot on me as he pressed his nose into the fabric-covered clitoris and breathed deeply. “God, you smell good.”

His blunt, open language had me so turned on I could barely think, let alone speak as he continued to press his face into my most private spaces, occasionally nipping at me through the flimsy barrier. I just moaned again as he finally slipped my panties down my legs and spread my thighs wide so he could fit his large shoulders between them. He kneeled onto the floor and yanked me forward so that I was hanging off the edge of the bed, my legs dangling helplessly over his back. God, was it possible to want someone this badly?

“Jesus!” I cried as his tongue drew a straight line from my entrance up to the edge of my clit and back down again before flicking inside me.

“You taste so fucking good, Skylar,” he muttered against my tightened flesh as he slipped a finger deep inside me and then moved his tongue back up to tickle my clit. “Will you

come for me, baby? I want to feel you in my mouth. I want to feel your pussy clench around my fingers so I can imagine it around my cock.”

I wasn't going to have much of a choice. His tongue and fingers were doing some sort of voodoo that might have had me split apart in no time, but it was his words proved to be my undoing in record time.

“Oh, GOD!” I cried out as he slid another finger inside me and sucked hard on my clit. “I'm coming, Jesus FUCKING Christ, I'm COMING!”

He continued to suck and tease until the spasms coursing through my body lessened, and I sank back into my pillow with a sigh. His fingers stayed where they were, continuing to massage a spot inside me that for some reason I had never found before on my own, a spot that drew my orgasm out far past its normal length until my body had lost almost all range of motion.

I lay there for a moment, caring little that I was completely exposed from the waist down, legs spread and all while his finger continued its slow, consistent movement that eventually started another small fire in my belly. I inhaled, long and deep, even as my muscles clenched in anticipation.

“What about you?” I croaked, propping myself up on my elbows with some difficulty, since his hand remained where it was while he watched intently. Wow, what he was doing felt unbelievably good. “I can repay the favor, you know.” His fingers pressed a little harder, and I tipped my head toward the ceiling before collapsing back onto my back.

Brandon smiled, and keeping his fingers where they were, gently removed my legs from around his shoulders and moved back up the bed to lay beside me so that we were face to face as I turned toward him. His tongue toyed leisurely with mine, just urgent enough to cause my hips to arch luxuriously with the rhythm of his hand.

“I’ll take you up on that some time, Red,” he said as he broke away. “But I told you. Right now is for you. Do you like what I’m doing with my fingers?”

I nodded, closing my eyes at the thought of it. There was an unfamiliar sensation building around that spot, one that felt a lot like when I normally had a clitoral orgasm, but as if this were building from the inside out.

“It’s your G-Spot, Red,” he said in between long, languid kisses.

“Yes, I know that,” I murmured, although without much conviction. Having been relieved of the week-long tension, I felt boneless next to him, but the growing insistence of his mouth betrayed a thirst of his that had not yet been met.

“Have you ever had an orgasm this way before?”

I shook my head, still unable to open my eyes but pulling his lips back to me. God, he was an unbelievable kisser. I almost felt like I could come just from the feeling of his tongue twisting with mine alone. Surprisingly, the building tension in the pit of my stomach continued to grow in response to the steady, insistent movement of his fingers inside me, causing my breath to hitch. Like a lot of women, I had never actually had an orgasm without clitoral stimulation before, so even through my post-orgasmic haze, I was surprised to find

myself approaching something like it. My inside quivered. My hips instinctually rocked into his hand.

“You’re so tight, baby,” Brandon rumbled against my neck. “I can feel you squeezing my fingers. Next time you’re going to do this on my cock. You’re almost there. Do you feel it?”

I nodded. That feeling was growing, that tightness, the friction amassing in a way that left me powerless to control it. “Yes,” I moaned against the warm skin of his neck. “Oh my God. Yeah. Fuck. Yes, something’s...*coming*.”

His fingers started moved more intently inside me, and I fought the urge to swear profusely. This was too much. I couldn’t take it.

“You *can* take it,” he echoed my thoughts as he slid a third finger inside to join the other two, stretching me just a delicious bit more and intensifying the pressure on that unaccountably sensitive spot inside me. Too delirious to realize that I had been speaking my internal monologue out loud, I merely accepted his lips as they closed over mine hungrily. His fingers continued their tortuous rhythm, pushing me right over the edge.

“Let it go, Skylar,” he growled as his fingers curled just a little harder and he set his thumb securely over the still-throbbing nub of my clit. “You can do it, baby.”

Then he bit my ear and squeezed.

“AaaaaaaAAAAAAAAHH!” The scream left my lips like a siren as the rest of my body convulsed against his hand and body. He held me tightly against him as I shook out my

second, infinitely more intense orgasm in his arms. His own breaths were heavy against my neck long after I finished.

Finally, once my body had gone entirely limp, he removed his hand gently from between my legs and used the towel hanging on the end of my bed to wipe it off before coming back to where I lay motionless and gathering me firmly against him.

“Holy shit,” I finally murmured into the crisp edges of his shirt collar. I felt like a sponge that had been completely wrung out. Emptied. And yet perfectly content. “Holy shit.”

He chuckled, stroking my hair gently as he pressed my head against his chest. He was still fully dressed, I realized, while I was almost completely naked. My limbs, however, felt like noodles, and I was too exhausted to care about anything else.

“Do you have a washcloth somewhere?” he asked gently a few moments later. He gently disengaged his arm from under my heavy head and pushed up from the bed.

With my eyes still closed, I gestured vaguely with one spaghetti-like arm. “There’s a stack in the bathroom cupboard over the toilet.”

He chuckled. “Okay, Red, I’ll be right back in a sec.”

Alone, as my senses returned, the magnitude of what we had just done hit me like a truck running full speed. My eyes opened and I stared up at the cracks in the ceiling, which suddenly seemed as gaping as canyons. Shit. This wasn’t just a fun flirtation with my former boss anymore; with his deft touch, the balance of power had been completely knocked

astray. I had just been rocked completely, irrecoverably to my core. But men like Brandon Sterling could have anyone they wanted—there was absolutely no reason for him to stick around when things inevitably got tough.

If this ended—no, *when* it inevitably ended—how could I be happy with anything else knowing this was the possibility still lingering out there? This was bad. Suddenly possessed with the need to cover myself, I yanked the edge of my quilt over me and burrowed under it, eager to curl up like a shrimp and cover my nakedness. We hadn't even left my apartment yet—we hadn't even been on a *date!*—and I already knew I wouldn't be able to say no to him. This was very, very bad.

“We still have time to make our reservation if we hurry,” Brandon called from the bathroom. “You don't have to worry.”

I wasn't about him that what he had just done had completely shattered every other sexual experience I had ever had, and he had only removed his jacket. Don't worry? How could I not?

~

Chapter 14

When he emerged from the bathroom, I had already picked my clothes off the floor and thrown on my bathrobe. The tatty blue thing wasn't the sexiest thing in the world to be wearing, but I wasn't planning to put on the dress he had immediately managed to get me out of, nor was I going to parade around my room naked except for my bra and stockings. Sex was obviously not going to be an adequate means to assert myself with Brandon Sterling.

I sheepishly took the damp cloth he had brought back for me and ducked into the bathroom myself without looking at him.

In the mirror I took one look at my swollen lips, mussed hair, and blotchy skin, and smacked myself lightly in the forehead. What the hell was I thinking? *Duh, you weren't.* Instead, I had come apart at the seams with someone I hardly knew.

It didn't matter if I was feminist or not. The reality was that most men thought little of women they perceived to be easy. While normally I wouldn't care about such designations, I certainly cared about what Brandon Sterling thought. All it would take would be a look or a glance to intimate the worst to a colleague and get the rumor mill started.

On top of which, I had simply never experienced anything like that before. I had definitely been with other men; it had never been anything close to that kind of heat. But what had we done, exchanged maybe five or six words before he basically pounced on me? My insides crumbled as I realized

that he must have walked in thinking I was going to be an easy score. As much as I hated hearing other people shame women about having casual sex, every obnoxious comment I'd ever heard about giving away the milk for free chanted through my head on a repeat. I knocked my knuckles on forehead again and again, wincing at the memories. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

And now, as likely as not, he was getting ready to bolt, if he hadn't already done so. How embarrassing would it be when I walked out there after having freshly redone my makeup for no one at all? I turned the water on in the sink and proceeded to scrub it all off. If I was even going to face him, it would be with a fresh face. It with be without any pretense.

When I finally ventured out of the bathroom, Brandon was sitting on the corner of the small sofa in the living room, buffing the face of his watch with a small handkerchief. He had put back on his jacket, and his shirt and tie had been smoothed back into place. The only signs of our little tryst remaining were a few stray hairs out of place at the crown of his head.

My stomach simultaneously calmed and leapt at sight of him (how were such contradictory emotions even possible?). As I shuffled to stand next to the couch, he looked up with a shy smile before glancing away. Shit. He seemed as unable to make eye contact as I was.

"I was afraid you'd gotten lost in there." He reached out and squeezed my hand and then, as if by afterthought, tugged me closer to sidle awkwardly next to him, his arm draped around my waist.

Just as awkwardly, I rested my arm on his shoulder. “I’m fine.” I wasn’t, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Good.” He held up his wristwatch, which looked like a very expensive Rolex. “We should get going. Are you going to wear the same thing?”

I glanced down the hall, where my dress lay in wrinkled heap at the edge of my bed. It was a good outfit, and I felt good in it, but I also knew I had chosen it specifically for him. “Ah, no. I’ll have to find something else.”

“Well, hurry. We’ve got that reservation.”

Somewhat taken aback by his newly curt tone, I shuffled back into my bedroom and shut the door before proceeding to search out a new pair of panties and a new outfit. When I discovered that I had a sizable run down the back of one stocking, I decided to hell with his original request for a dress, and pulled out my favorite pair of black jeans, a slouchy, cream-colored sweater, and comfortable oxford shoes. The outfit was the opposite of sexy.

When I walked back out with my thick parka over my arm, Brandon looked up, confused. “I thought you were going to wear a dress.”

I looked down at my outfit and shrugged. “It’s cold outside. And now my stockings are torn.” I grabbed my purse from the rack by the door and slung it over my shoulder. “You ready?”

His face twisted momentarily into an adorable pout as he took in my covered legs, but he shrugged and followed me out

the door, quickly catching my waist as we walked down the hall.

“It’s just as well,” he growled in my ear, making my skin tingle under his lips. “I’m not sure I could have focused all night with the dirty thoughts those stockings put in my head. It’s bad enough looking at your butt in those pants.”

With that, he briefly squeezed the outline of my ass, and I yelped, banging my head on his shoulder. He only flashed me a toothy grin in response, and proceeded to make me laugh and yelp all the way down the stairs with his continued onslaught to that part of my anatomy.

~

It wasn’t until he ushered me into the back of a sleek black vehicle that I realized it wasn’t just a run-of-the-mill car for hire, but a Mercedes S-Class AMG. I didn’t know much about cars, but my dad drooled over this particular model every time he dragged me to the yearly car show at the convention center. They retailed for more than all three years of law school tuition combined.

“That’s David, my driver,” Brandon said, gesturing to a middle-aged man in the front seat who wore a neat white shirt and black tie. David waved a black-gloved hand, but didn’t turn around. He gave me a friendly wink through the rear-view mirror as he pulled out from the curb.

“Hi David,” I said with a brief smile at the face in the mirror as Brandon tucked me neatly into his side. The spacious back seats of the sedan were an extremely soft, camel-colored leather, and as the engine purred to life, I marveled at how quiet Boston suddenly seemed from inside this car. I could

understand now why Brandon had scoffed at the Town Car in New York. It was like equating haute couture with the Goodwill.

“All right?” he murmured into my ear.

I nodded. “Yeah. Where are we going for dinner?”

“One of my favorite restaurants. You’ll see.” he said cryptically, but said no more.

I was still feeling shy after our encounter, and felt relieved when Brandon didn’t press me for conversation. He seemed just as content to look out the window, drumming his fingers with nervous energy on the pane until, a few moments later, a flurry of emails announced themselves on his phone.

“Sorry,” he said as he unwrapped his arm from around my shoulder. “These won’t take long.”

“No problem,” I said, and slid over to the other window. He frowned at the action, but quickly turned his attention back to his phone while I watched the city pass by.

It was hard to imagine having the money required for this sort of lifestyle—cars, drivers, live-in help. The kind of money required to spend money on these sorts of things without even thinking about it. While I had a modest cache courtesy of Janette, I had only ever used it to pay for Dad’s previous “issues” and for the very expensive education that would have forced him to empty garbage cans into his eighties. My original goal was to give what remained to my dad as a retirement gift when he qualified for his pension in another four years, although, I realized with a sinking stomach, that

prospect might now happen if he was getting into trouble again.

But that was clearly chump change compared to the kind of wealth that Brandon Sterling obviously had. Live-in staff, a top of the line Mercedes, a ten-million-dollar townhouse on the Commons. Wikipedia had informed me that his net worth was upwards of two billion dollars, and a number likely to grow once his investment firm went public. Guys like this didn't even need to work—their money made money for them, more in year—or even a week—than most people could hope to make their entire lives. I ran a finger over the seat back, a softer leather than any jacket I had ever touched. I peeked at Brandon, who returned my look with his familiar half-smile as he finished off another message on his phone.

“Sorry,” he said again as he continued to type. “I did say this would be hard, didn't I? Some things won't keep until the morning.”

“It's all right,” I replied as I turned to look out my window again. “I know your business is important.” I just hoped he'd let me see what more he had to offer than just wealth. And sex. He already knew so much about my life, but the truth was, I knew very little about him beyond the smattering of information on the internet.

Like a shadow of the other cars on the road, the Mercedes wove its way on and off the highway down to the South End of the city. I started to wonder if Brandon was taking me somewhere in Back Bay, or maybe even Dorchester, although that seemed like a weird choice for a date. Maybe he was going to show me where he grew up too. The thought cheered

me. But when David pulled off at a private drive next to Logan Airport, my eyes blinked wide open. This definitely wasn't a quick visit to the old neighborhood.

The car came to a silent stop in front a small building guarding the mostly empty airfield, and David quickly jumped out and ran around to my side to open the door. On shaky legs, I stepped out of the car and looked suspiciously beyond the chain-linked fence. A few small planes were corralled in rows at the far end of the field, next to a closed hangar. They all looked deserted and completely unready for flight. However, nearer to the small building guarding the entrance to the runway, a small, sleek jet was testing its engines, lights on, side door open, and a small portable set of stairs pulled up for passengers to board.

I flipped my head back toward Brandon, who was now standing behind me watching carefully for my reaction.

“Is...is that plane for us?” I asked.

He nodded, eyes wide. “It is.”

I balked, my head swiveling back and forth between the plane and him. “You chartered a jet for our first date?”

His offered a small, tentative smile. I would have found the twinkle in his eyes charming had I not been completely floored by what was happening.

“Well, no,” he said carefully. “The jet is actually mine. Or at least the firm's. I can use it whenever I want.”

Looking back at to airfield, I saw that Sterling was painted clearly across the jet's steel siding in bold black letters, accompanied by the sharp black and red logo of his company.

I pivoted on my heel to face Brandon, starting to feel like I was watching a tennis match.

“What...where...why? Where are we going that we have to take your *private plane*?” I sputtered.

He leaned toward me, his smile disappearing as the sound of my tone. A big hand reached out to steady my elbow; I felt like I was about to topple over.

“Well, my favorite restaurant is a small brasserie in Paris,” he said slowly. “They’re open late. I thought you might like to go, considering your history there.”

This time I coughed, hard. “My...my *what*?”

The smile on Brandon’s face vanished. “Your history. It said on your resume that you spoke French, and you mentioned the other night that you studied abroad there.” He leaned in and studied my face, all traces of triumph gone. “What’s wrong, Red?”

It wasn’t his fault. I had confirmed those things. And there was no way he could know that although I loved France, my year in Paris was one of the darkest of my life, one stained with rejection from my mother and a lot of self-medication courtesy of Parisian nightclubs. But still.

“I...don’t have a passport with me,” I faltered.

“Oh, I may have snooped around your place a little while you were in the bathroom,” he said with another cheeky grin, which immediately flattened to a frown as he fully observed me. I could feel the color falling from my face. I must have looked like death. I certainly felt like it.

“It wasn’t hard to find,” he continued, obviously confused. “You keep your desk very organized. Skylar, what the hell is wrong? I thought you’d like this.”

I couldn’t move, couldn’t speak. Kieran’s words from Monday echoed through my head, her descriptions of the psychopaths that ran over women who came to the clinic for help. *Sometimes a man who comes off as a prince is really just the devil in disguise.* This was a first date, for Christ’s sake. Who whisks someone off to Paris in a private plane for dinner? Not to mention stealing my passport? That, after following me to New York. The ostentatious shoes. All of this felt at once grossly strange and also too familiar. Suddenly all I could think of was Patrick, with his habit of rewarding me with some fancy dinner or theater tickets when I suspected him of cheating. There was a pawn shop in East New York that had made some serious money off the consolation jewelry I’d deposited there after that relationship was finished.

Yes, once it was described to me, I realized I was very familiar with sociopaths, considering I’d already been with one. It wasn’t a situation I ever wanted to be again, and dinner in Paris was exponentially bigger—and more inappropriate—than diamond earrings or tickets to *Aida*.

Full of sudden resolve, I looked up at Brandon. My body was starting to shake, fury slowly mounting. First the guy essentially asks me to be his call girl, then stalks me through New York City, more than two hundred miles away. I thought we had come to an understanding about his boundary issues. Clearly not.

“Where is it?” I asked quietly.

“Where’s what?”

“My passport.”

Frowning in confusion, Brandon reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the thin blue booklet. It was well worn and nearly full, mostly full of stamps from the traveling I did while living in France. I plucked it neatly from Brandon’s grasp and shoved it into my purse.

“Did you take anything else?” I demanded as I stepped away.

His thick eyebrows crinkled together in confusion. “What? No! Red, what’s going on?”

“I’m going to go,” I announced a little too loudly, glad that my tongue wasn’t choosing this moment to tie itself into knots. Hands shaking, I turned and started to walk down the sidewalk toward the gated entrance to the airfield, beyond which I hoped there would be an easy walk to the main terminal. The shuttle to the T wouldn’t be far from there; I could possibly be home in an hour.

“What?” Brandon jogged after me, grabbing my hand and forcing me to turn around. “What the hell, Skylar? Where are you going?”

I spit out the strands of hair that flew into my face, now too mad to speak calmly.

“A plane to Paris? *Really?*” I huffed as I wrenched my hand out of his clutch. My accent was starting to come out now. “It’s our *first date*. I’m a poor student. I would have been impressed with anything more than Dunkin Donuts. I thought

you understood now I didn't want to play these kinds of games! What the fuck are you trying to prove with all of this?"

His mouth hung open for a moment as he shook his head. "What...are you serious?"

I didn't reply, just stared at him in the wind and begged myself inwardly not to cave. His eyes, so wide and so blue, almost made me believe that he was innocent, that he really did just want to show me the best time he could. But visions of Patrick's sly smile danced through my head, right along with Brandon's coarse words in his office. No. I wasn't doing this again.

"This is really not how I saw this going, you know," Brandon said coldly. "Is this how you normally show your gratitude when people do nice things for you?"

"Don't give me a guilt trip just because I'm not falling for your manipulative bullshit," I snapped at him. "None of this —" I waved a gloved hand erratically in the general direction of the plane "—is not about me. Obviously."

"Do you think *I* regularly just hop on my plane to Paris whenever the mood strikes me?" he asked incredulously. "Of course it was for you. I told you, I needed to make time for this. Do you have any idea how much it costs me to do something like this? Now come on, let's go!"

He reached out to grab my hand again, but I yanked it quickly out of reach. "I *do* know how ridiculously much this costs, actually! Which is exactly why I know it has more to do with your ego than it has to do with someone you just met. And any sane person would know I couldn't possibly accept this kind of gift from someone I hardly know!"

“But you’ll let him make you come instead?” Brandon retorted. His eyes flashed, and a large vein throbbed at the side of his neck. “I guess I know what kind of girl you really are, Red.”

Before I could control it, my hand flew forward and slapped him hard across the face. The leather of my glove left an angry red crease mark across his cheek, and he stumbled backward in shock, holding his own gloved hand up against his face.

“Fuck you, *Mister Sterling*,” I said in an eerily even voice just loud enough to be heard over the plane’s engines and the flights taking off from Logan. I was angry enough to have passed the point of shouting. It stung beyond belief that my fears about getting physical with him so soon were obviously correct, and so soon after I had made myself so vulnerable. Clearly I was making the right decision.

I tugged my purse, which had fallen down my arm in my struggle, back over my shoulder, and shoved my hair away from my face again with an angry swipe.

“Don’t *ever* fucking contact me again,” I hissed. I turned on the heel of my shoe and stalked away, leaving him standing next to his fancy car at the curb.

“You’ll regret this,” he called after me. “You know you will, Skylar!”

I didn’t answer, just held one finger up in an extremely rude gesture as I continued to walk to the main terminal, eager to get all vestiges of Brandon Sterling away and out of my mind as soon as I possibly could.

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Chapter 15

It took me nearly two hours that night to walk around half of Logan airport to find the T shuttle and then take two more trains back to Harvard Square. I got more than a few strange looks as I muttered to myself like a crazy woman, occasionally punching a fist into the down of my parka at a particularly caustic thought. Every time I thought I had calmed myself down, a new wave of fury swept over me as I remember his words, remembered the way I was essentially confirmed as a foregone conclusion. Fuck him. There was nothing else to say about it.

At one point another passenger on the train, a cocky-faced man who looked three sheets to the wind with his friends, asked to smile at me from across the car. The suggestive leer brought out my inner New Yorker in full force as I snarled, “What the fuck are you lookin’ at?”

He didn’t reply, just murmured “bitch” as he and his friends stepped off at the Kendall Square stop. Yeah, the way I was feeling right now, he had no idea.

It was nearly eleven by the time I walked back into my apartment to find Jane sitting on the couch in the dark, drinking from a bottle of wine in her lap while another sat unopened on the coffee table in front of her. There was no glass in sight. A rerun of *Mork and Mindy* was playing on the small TV set in the corner, and Jane chuckled in the dark while she rubbed smears of mascara beneath her eyes.

I flipped on the lights. “What’s up, Howard Hughes? Bad date?”

Jane groaned. “The absolute fucking *worst*.”

“I bet I can top you.” I stripped off my parka and glove and flopped them on the kitchen table before joining her on the couch.

“You’re on,” she said, and took another swig directly from the bottle. “So, Physics student, right? You’d think he’d be shy and sweet, an egghead type. But when I tell him I need to go to the bathroom, he follows me and tries to convince me to give him a blowjob right there in the club. Like, in the fucking hallway. He even started to unbuckle his fucking *pants*.”

“Sounds like a real winner,” I replied sarcastically as I pulled the bottle from her lap and took a long drink myself.

“I said no, of course, considering I’d rather not have a record for indecent exposure going into my first year as an ASA. And when I got back from the bathroom, he was sitting with another woman with his hand up her fucking skirt.”

She looked up, and I could see the marks of tear stains trailing through the mascara under her glasses and over her cheeks. Immediately I scooted over on the couch and pulled her head onto my shoulder.

“Aw, Janie, I’m sorry. What a shit,” I murmured as I smoothed the uneven spikes of her messy bob. I took a long drink of wine.

“It wasn’t even just some chick he picked up at the bar,” Jane said. “Turns out he had a whole other date planned for the night, Skylar. He double booked us in case I wouldn’t put out.”

“Did you at least throw a drink in his face before you left?”

She sat up, grabbed the bottle back from me, and took another long slug of wine, burping loudly after she was done. “Two, actually. His and his runner-up’s. God, men are scum.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice. What is this sludge we’re drinking?”

“Good old Chuckie Shaw,” she giggled. She held it back to me.

I grimaced. Wine wasn’t my drink, and this was bottom of the barrel crap. But I took the bottle, another several gulps.

“It really must have been bad,” Jane said as she watched me gulp away.

I handed the bottle back to her. “You have no idea.”

I proceeded to tell her everything about my night with Brandon, from my impromptu double orgasm to his insane plans for the rest of the evening. By the end, she was staring at me with her mouth open in disbelief, all thoughts of her own shitty night long gone.

“I can’t believe he said that!” she said after I recounted his parting remark about the kind of girl I apparently was.

She handed me the bottle as if she knew I really needed it. She wasn’t wrong.

“What a dick,” Jane continued. “I mean, first of all, who even thinks about sex like that anymore? This isn’t nineteen fifty-fucking-seven, you know? A, you’re not a girl, you’re a woman. And B, you have every prerogative to have any form

of sex with whomever you want without worrying about some ridiculous code of purity. We're not virginal damsels protecting our fucking flowers, am I right? You should be able to do whatever you want without that kind of condescending judgment, especially from the partner you chose to fucking do it with in the first place!"

"Here, here." I held the bottle up in silent agreement to her statements before I took another welcome slug. The bottle was almost half empty when I arrived, and we were already nearly done with it. My head was fuzzy, but I welcomed the oblivion if it would block out the twin faces of Patrick and Brandon that kept filtering through my mind. I had done the right thing. I had.

"Was he at least good?"

I closed my eyes, downing the rest of the bottle before opening them back up to answer. "Unfortunately, he might be the best. At what we did, anyway. He literally had me screaming, Janie. Like, the way those idiots in romance novels do, but you know that no one actually does in real life? Yeah, I was doing that. Best orgasm of my life, bar none."

"Oh, that is a shame," Jane remarked with genuine remorse. "Why is it always the assholes who are good in the sack? Practice, you think?"

I cringed, not wanting to think about just how Brandon had accumulated his skills in the bedroom. It only made me feel more stupid for letting him use them on me. *I'm shit at dating*, he'd said. Yeah fucking right.

"I can't believe you turned down a free trip to Paris, though," Jane said with a giggle as she leaned over to open the

second bottle of wine. “Girl, it’s *Paris*.”

“Shit.” I giggled and fell back in the sofa with my eyes closed. “I know, right?”

~

After nursing a hangover on Saturday morning by swimming at the pool, I spent the weekend buried in reading assignments for my classes and other case studies on domestic violence. There was no word from Brandon, and with a mild sense remorse, I released that we had still never exchanged cell phone numbers. But every time I recalled his comment at the airport, a satisfying wave of rage would flood my system, effectively barring other, more melancholy reminiscences.

“Skylar! Hold up!”

I turned around from where I stood on the cobblestoned street after exiting the student athletic facility on Sunday after another swim. I tried to swim an hour or so most days of the week, finding it helped me clear my head after hours of studying and work. It was a habit I had done since I was a child, when the pool was the closest place for Bubbe to take me to for after school activities. Swim team was the cheapest sport I could participate in. I was too little to ever be any good, but it was a good habit to keep.

Jared bounded down the steps of the facility to stand next to me on the sidewalk, the ease of his actions betraying an obvious history as an athlete. Despite the cold weather, he was only wearing a pair of fitted track pants and a t-shirt that outlined strong shoulder and a lean, toned chest.

“A little underdressed, aren’t you?” I asked as he caught up to me and continued to jog in place. Both of our breaths were visible in the cold air, although it wasn’t supposed to snow again for at least a week.

“I jog to and from my apartment,” Jared said with a smile.

“Oh? Whereabouts do you live?”

He nodded in the direction of Mass Ave. “Down by Porter Square. I’ve had the place for a while.”

“Just you?” There was something in the way he said it that made it sound like he didn’t live with the usual ménage of roommates the rest of us dealt with.

“Just me.”

I repressed the urge to raise my eyebrows. Jared couldn’t have been more than a year or two older than me, and Porter Square, another small enclave of Cambridge, wasn’t cheap.

“So listen,” he said. His light brown hair flopped charmingly on his forehead as he bounced up and down. It looked very soft. “I was thinking about that date.”

I blinked, trying for a moment to remember what he was talking about. Our last interlude at the bookstore came rushing back to me; with everything else that had happened over the past few weeks, I had completely forgotten about my promise to contact him.

“God,” I said. “I’m so sorry; I totally forgot to call you.”

He shrugged. He was so easygoing that I found myself smiling back at him for no reason.

“No big deal,” he said. “The start of the term is always busy. But I was hoping you might want to go out sometime now that things are settled.”

Despite the allure of Jared’s obvious normalcy when compared to the fiasco of last night, I found myself hesitating. I was really close to finishing school, and after that I’d have the bar exam, not to mention most likely a new job that would take up nearly all of my free time. Maybe it wasn’t the best idea to be getting involved with anyone, drama-free or not.

“Nothing too much,” Jared pressed on, stopping his bouncing around to reach out to touch my forearm. “I know you’re busy. I am too. I was thinking brunch, maybe? Next Sunday?”

I pursed my lips, considering. Jared didn’t exactly give me the same stomach-clenching butterflies I had been experiencing of late, but maybe that was a good thing. Unlike an evening date, there wouldn’t be the pressure to go home with him after or to bring him up to my apartment. The date could be as little as an hour, after which we would both certainly need to go home and prepare for classes the following day. Jared was in the exact same position I was; he would understand the fact that neither of us could afford much to give the other. He was cute and nice. Maybe he was just the thing to put this whole messy two weeks behind me.

“All right,” I relented. “Sunday it is. Can you text me the details? I’ll meet you there around ten.”

I received a face-splitting grin in response, and couldn’t help but respond in kind. Jared’s joy was contagious.

“Great!” he said, and started to back away. “See you Sunday!”

~

After finishing my week’s classes, I arrived at Family Law Services on Wednesday to find Kieran on the phone, frowning and talking broadly in a way that was uncharacteristic for her usually stoic demeanor. She gestured that she’d only be a minute, and waved that I should take a seat at my small desk.

Kieran and I had quickly found an easy rhythm of working together, having built a rapport based on our similar backgrounds. I discovered that we had a lot in common, including a certain mentality that was a product of growing up in working class neighborhoods with single parents who were civil servants. Apparently her mother worked for the Boston Metro as a conductor after her father left them when she was a kid. I gathered that her experience was what fueled her desire to do so much pro-bono work, although she was equally determined to be successful in order to support her mother. I could understand. One of my biggest goals was to make enough so that my dad wouldn’t have to empty trashcans anymore and could spend all his time on his music. Exactly how I was going to do that wasn’t as clear.

“You’re ridiculous, you know that?” she barked to whoever was on the phone with her. “When are you going to learn to just relax? Seriously, Brandon, you’ll do better if you just stop with the fucking bravado.”

I stiffened when I heard that name. How likely was it that she knew two men with that name?

“Okay, tell me what she says,” Kieran said quickly as she noticed me in the doorway. “Good luck. I’ll talk to you about it next week, all right?”

She hung up, and turned to me, quickly burying the obvious smile on her face. “Sorry about that, Skylar. Just a friend who needed some advice on girls.” She couldn’t help the smirk that reappeared, as if she were enjoying some private joke.

“Brandon Sterling?” I couldn’t help myself.

Her eyebrows rose. “Oh, that’s right, I forgot that you know him.”

I nodded, hoping to God that my normally glass face wouldn’t flush and betray just how well I knew him. “Well, not really. How do you know him again?”

I knew I shouldn’t pry, but my curiosity was getting the best of me. While I knew that I was the one to leave him standing on an airport curb, for some reason the idea of him talking to another woman—which was clearly what they were discussing—really ate me up.

“We grew up together as kids,” she said simply. “In the same building in Dorchester. At least, until we were twelve or so.”

“Did his family move away or something?”

She looked at me curiously, and I focused on maintaining my features in the blandest expression possible, as if it didn’t really matter to me what the answer was.

“No, he went into foster care,” she said carefully, observing me in the same way I’d seen her observe clients to

gauge their reactions, usually to determine whether or not they were lying. Kieran didn't usually care if you were guilty, but she wouldn't represent you if you lied to her. "His dad was a rough son of a bitch until he was locked up, and his mom was a junkie. He had it kind of bad, and used to spend a lot of time in my family's apartment."

I balked. I'd forgotten about that. "I'm surprised he'd be all right with you telling me that, considering how private he is."

Kieran shrugged. "It's a pretty well known fact. Not on his Wikipedia page or anything, but one of the worst kept secrets in Boston. It's why his firm devotes so much pro-bono work toward child advocacy cases. He actually donated the money that allowed Harvard to fund this center. Half the volunteer attorneys here are from Sterling Grove. He got lucky with his foster parents, but a lot of kids don't."

I blinked, unsure of what to say. This was more than I knew about Brandon. He'd mentioned his time in the system, but I hadn't pressed him on it.

"I think that's why he always has a hard time with women," she continued, uncharacteristically chatty as she gestured at the phone. "Especially lately. He goes on these dates and he just does too much, you know? Hang-ups from when he was a kid, so he's always trying too hard to make people like him. I keep telling him that not everyone worries about that like he does, that he's much more likable when he doesn't go overboard with money and gifts and things, but he just can't seem to rein it in. Attracts too many gold-diggers and scares off a lot of the good ones."

Kieran peered at me with one raised eyebrow, as if expecting me to own up to something. I gulped, praying my skin wouldn't betray me now with an obvious flush.

“What happened to his folks?” I asked with a carefully controlled voice.

She furrowed her eyebrows. “Well, I know his mom is dead, and I think his dad is still in jail. Why are you so interested in him?” she asked. It was a direct call to my bluff.

This time I was unable to stifle the flush that ran up my face. “Just curious,” I said, hoping to pass off my facial color as just being embarrassed by being put on the spot. “He’s an interesting...character, you know?”

“Interesting. Mm-hmm,” Kieran said. I couldn't tell if she believed me or not. “Do you have that file on the Chang case?”

With that, our conversation left the topic of Brandon Sterling, and reverted back to work. But even as I tried my hardest to focus on the briefs in front of me, all I could see was a pair of bright blue eyes, staring at me with a longing I was trying so hard to stifle in myself. Date that weekend, hadn't she'd said? It was exactly as I'd thought—there was nothing special about our interaction. To him, I was just “that kind of girl.” Eager to rid myself of the sinking feeling taking root in my stomach, I took out my phone and texted Jared to confirm our date for Sunday. I needed to stop thinking about the one person I knew wasn't any good for me.

~

Chapter 16

I had never been asked on a date in the morning before, so I found myself unsure of what to wear when I got up at nine to get ready for brunch. Jane stumbled into my bedroom with a mug of coffee and a cup of tea for me after I got out of the shower.

“I don’t know what is wrong with this boy that he thinks Sunday morning is a good time for a date,” she grumbled as she took a seat on my bed. She laid back into the set of four down pillows stacked against my headboard, her thin frame sinking into their plush creases. “He’s basically telling you he has absolutely no interest in fucking. Does that sound like someone you want to get busy with? Someone who’s like, eh, my penis can wait, so let’s just have some scones instead?”

“It sounds like someone who won’t mess with me,” I replied as I took a sip of my tea. I set it back on my desk and turned to my closet to find something to wear. I had already run product through my hair, content to let it air dry into soft waves down my back. It was just breakfast, after all.

Jane’s short black bob, which she had dyed with a bright red streak two nights ago, was currently standing up on one side. She snuggled further into my pillows. “Why is your bed so much more comfortable than mine? It’s the same shitty university-issued mattress. Also, I can’t believe you make your bed on a Sunday.”

I shrugged at her via the mirror in which I was trying to decide between two different sweaters, holding each one up against my robe-covered body.

“I make my bed every morning,” I said. “It gives me a sense of accomplishment with which to start my day.”

“Freak,” Jane muttered. Her puffy eyes betrayed a long night; I hadn’t heard her come in last night at all, so I assumed it wasn’t until the wee hours of the morning.

“Which one of these do you like better?” I asked, turning around to compare the black slouchy turtleneck with a green cardigan.

“I like them both,” she said, “for sitting by the fire with a cup of cocoa and a needle-working project. You’re twenty-six, Skylar. Please tell me you own something that I couldn’t find in my grandmother’s closet.”

I blanched and hugged the sweaters to my frame. “Jeez, tell me how you really feel.”

“I don’t care if this guy somehow screwed up his circadian rhythms so that he thinks night is day and day is night. A date’s a date, Skylar, and those sweaters will make you look like a shut-in cat lady. A really young, cute cat lady, but still a cat lady.” She looked pointedly at my glasses, which I was currently wearing instead of contacts. “Are you going to wear those too?”

“You wear glasses every day!” I cried, throwing the black sweater at her.

She pulled it off her face and tossed it unceremoniously onto the end of the bed. “Yes, but I own about five different vintage frames, and they are part of my persona. I am the Asian Rivers Cuomo. The half-Korean pseudo-hipster. Every guy who asks me out probably does it because I wear them, as

they are a critical part of my appeal. Yours are about as thick as a soda bottle, and you only wear them when your allergies are acting up. I know how much like to show off those emerald beauties.”

I stuck my tongue out and threw the other sweater at her, which she deflected neatly onto the black one at the end of the bed. She had good reflexes for someone who still had bedhead.

“Do you even want to go on this date at all, Sky?” she asked seriously, sitting up from pillows to look at me straight on.

I shrugged. “You pushed me at him. He’s nice. And cute. And not planning any manipulative grand overtures that require him to snoop through my desk and charter planes.” I pressed my lips together, suddenly determined to put my best foot forward. “Yes,” I said, this time with more emphasis. “Yes, I definitely want to go on this date.”

Jane studied me for a few seconds before heaving a big, fake sigh and standing up with her coffee. “God, you make me do everything for you,” she groaned. “Go put your contacts in, actually dry your hair, and I’ll find you something to wear.”

~

An hour later, I found myself sitting at a table at Graze, the newest hotspot in Cambridge. Upon walking in, Jared and I were quickly escorted to a seat at a massive farmhouse table along with several other patrons, and were given flour sack napkins and a menu of the week’s specials. The place was bright and raucous on the otherwise cloud gray day.

“You look really nice today, Skylar,” Jared said with a smile as he sat down across from me after we’d given the hostess our coats.

I nodded in thanks. Jane did right by me and had paired a long-sleeved, cream lace blouse over a pair of dark skinny jeans and black ankle boots. My hair was pulled back into a side chignon, a style that worked in tandem with the gold hoops dangling from my ears to highlight my eyes. The glasses were gone, and I’d touched up my face with a brush of mascara and some lip gloss.

“Daytime chic,” she pronounced after informing me that my ass didn’t quit in these jeans. After seeing Jared’s expression when I took off my parka, I decided she was right, although I wasn’t sure if I cared that he thought so too.

“This place is nice,” I said, looking around at the bright white interior, rustic tables, and the hanging plants that dangled from the ceiling. “It’s like spring in here. I feel like I’m in a greenhouse.”

Jared nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I’ve been wanting to try this place for a while. My folks said it was killer. It’s got a month’s wait for reservations, but they said we could probably get in for brunch. So, bingo, here we are!” He leaned over and set his hand briefly on top of mine. “I’m really glad I got to share it with you, Skylar.”

I fought the urge to take my hand back, and just smiled in response. Bingo? I could already hear Jane making Beaver Cleaver jokes in my head. *Don’t be a bitch, Crosby*, I told myself. Without waiting for a reply, Jared pulled his hand back and picked up his menu, and I did the same.

After much internal debate, I ordered the poached eggs over the spinach risotto, and Jared ordered a deconstructed crab cake with hollandaise sauce along with two Bloody Marys. The food was served in pretentiously small but tasty portions, and the date passed easily as we shared anecdotes and talked about school. Jared, I found out, had actually grown up in Manchester, and his family also had a house on Cape Cod. They were classic old New England denizens; his parents still lived in the eighteenth century house he had grown up in, and he had three direct descendants who were on the Mayflower. His father was serving his sixth term in Congress (which I'd already known) and his mother stayed at home. He had grown up with an older brother, a younger sister, and a dog named Quincy Adams.

"If you want an internship in D.C. this summer, I could probably set you up with an interview," he said after a bite of his crab.

"That's really nice of you, but I'm not really interested in politics," I said. There was also the fact that his father was a libertarian, and I came from a family of staunch New York Democrats. "Thanks anyway."

"So, what about you? What's your family like? You're from Brooklyn, right?"

Maybe it was the yuppie entitlement of the restaurant, or maybe it was the golden retriever named after a U.S. president, but suddenly I felt shy about revealing my family history. This guy was a nuclear family WASP to the nth degree, and I was an Irish-Jewish garbage collector's daughter whose mother had abandoned her when she was a baby. I had never been

ashamed of my background before, but I felt like a piece of foggy quartz being compared to a diamond.

“Ah, okay,” I said as I speared a bite of rice and egg. “I grew up in Flatbush—that’s a neighborhood in Brooklyn, close to Prospect Park. My dad works for the city and my mom’s an artist.”

I didn’t include the fact that I hardly knew her, and of course Jared latched onto her profession, which was, to types like him, charmingly bohemian.

“That’s so cool,” he said. “What kind of art?”

“Ah, installation, mostly.”

“Oh, like Jeff Koons?”

I gave a slow nod. “Yeah, sort of. I’d say her stuff is closer to Man Ray and Nancy Spero.”

“Oh.”

He blinked, and I could tell he had no idea who I was talking about. It didn’t really bother me. It was only from following my mom’s work online that I even knew who Nancy Spero was.

“I went to an exhibit on Andy Warhol once,” he offered weakly. “His stuff was pretty out there. Do you like it?”

I shrugged. “It’s my mom’s thing, not mine. I’m not really into art that much beyond the major stuff like Da Vinci and Michelangelo.”

Jared nodded in agreement and obvious relief. “Yeah, me too. Can’t argue with the *Mona Lisa*, can you?”

“No,” I said, holding back a grimace. I actually hated the *Mona Lisa*, but I didn’t think he’d want to know that. “Have you seen it?”

“Oh yeah!” he said enthusiastically. He seemed grateful that I’d given him another familiar topic to discuss. “When I was traveling in Europe after college. Backpacking with some friends.”

He then launched into a story about the hostel where he stayed in Paris, and I breathed a sigh of relief that I didn’t have to answer any more questions about my family.

~

Jared walked me back across campus to my building, holding my hand loosely in the cloudy sunlight as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I only wished that *I* felt like it was a natural thing to be doing.

“I know I’m not saving the world or anything,” he was saying as he talked about the job he was planning to take at his grandfather’s firm next year. “But I don’t know if that’s the point any more. If we spend all our time trying to give away our hard earned dollar, it makes people who don’t have much lose the ability to work hard, don’t you think? In a way, I’m helping them more by helping myself, don’t you think?”

I murmured my assent, although I couldn’t disagree more. Jared was nice, but his ignorance of his own entitlement was become more irritating by the second. After two hours of listening to him talk, I was more than ready to escape to the quiet confines of my apartment. I was tired of dodging questions about myself, and I wanted to get out of these tights

jeans and into something more comfortable. And talk to someone who didn't make me feel like I had to censor myself.

“Skylar?”

I blinked when Jared interrupted my thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“I said, I had a really nice time,” he said.

“Oh!” I said. “Yeah, me too. Thanks for brunch. You didn't have to pay, you know.”

“I didn't mind,” he said. He reached up and pushed back a stray lock of brown hair that had fallen from his neat coif. His hand drifted down and he took my other hand in his and tugged me closer. I watched in abject fascination as he closed his eyes and leaned in, his lips in a half smile with the knowledge that he was going to kiss me and that I would like it. He was so expectant that I didn't have the heart to avoid it. It wasn't until his lips were actually pressed on mine in a chaste, closed-mouth kiss that I finally closed my eyes too.

It wasn't the worst kiss in the world. But like so many times before, there was something missing. Or someone, my subconscious niggled. Someone blond. And tall. And with incredible blue eyes and soft, passionate lips. Someone who was definitely not kissing me now.

I counted the seconds until it was over. It took four.

After he pulled back, he smiled. “So, when can I see you again?”

“Well, I have classes and clinic all week,” I said, feeling shifty and noncommittal. Jared was a perfectly nice, handsome

guy. This didn't have to be that complicated. "I'm not sure."

"Friday night work for you?" he pressed, gripping my hand just a bit tighter while he lingered.

I glanced down at his grip. I just wanted to get out of the cold. "Sure," I said. "That should work."

"I'll call you," he said, and leaned in for another peck on the cheek. "See you later, Skylar."

"Okay," I said, and turned to unlock the door to my building as he walked down the street towards campus.

~

Once back at home, I changed into an infinitely more comfortable outfit of stretchy black pants and a gray flannel shirt and settled on the couch to finish reading for the weekend. After working steadily through the afternoon, I found myself with a rare evening free after finishing with all of the week's reading early. Jane was out with a study group at the library until late, and I found myself ambling about the apartment, uncharacteristically bored and without anything left to distract me from the one thing—or person, really—I had been trying not to think about. No matter what distraction I tried over the last few days—getting ahead in my classes, working additional hours at the clinic, swimming extra laps at the pool—I had not been able to get Kieran's description of Brandon out of my head.

I hardly knew him. That was the reality. Maybe his grand and at times inappropriate gestures made sense in light of Kieran's revelations. A poor kid from the South side who'd been neglected and abused by his drug-addicted parents. You

didn't need to be a psychologist to guess there would be some attachment issues there. No wonder he had tried so hard. People like that usually had a hard time accepting that others could like them just for who they were. Sometimes it turned the person into a manipulative, untrusting shit, but a lot of times it just came out with insecure actions that didn't really fit the social circumstance. So which one was Brandon's?

The thought of all of our interactions together felt completely disorienting. We were doing everything backwards. I had spent the night at his house before I'd barely known his first name. He's treated me like an employee after I'd already quit working for him. We'd...well, *he* had done things to me most people reserved for at least after they'd actually gone on a date together. None of it made any fucking sense. The more I thought about all of it, the more the world around me seemed to swim.

It was only nine-thirty. I contemplated going for a walk around Harvard Square, but a cold, heavy rain was falling outside, washing away the last of the snow from the weeks before and drenching Boston in deep currents that flooded the streets. I sighed. It had been a hard winter so far, and was showing no signs of letting up any time soon.

I shuffled to the kitchen and made myself a cup of tea before sliding on my slippers and gray sweater over a t-shirt and yoga pants. I had taken out my contacts and snagged my glasses off my nightstand before pulling some sheet music from the drawer underneath it. The building had a piano in a practice room in the basement, where I liked to play sometimes when I had a spare moment or two. I hadn't practiced in months, and knew I'd feel a bit clumsy on the

keys. But if music couldn't distract me from what was going through my mind, nothing could.

~

My dad, of course, was my first teacher on the piano, but I started taking real lessons from one of our neighbors when I was about five. Somewhat ironically, it was my obvious talent that made my musical education the only thing about my upbringing my mother had interest in consistently, whether she was actively a part of my life or not. As soon as it was determined that I had some promise as a pianist, her money secured the best instructors in New York, and Bubbe had dutifully schlepped me in and out of Manhattan twice a week until I was old enough to take the train myself. My ear for precision was applied toward classical training, and it was enough to earn me invitations to multiple conservatories when I graduated high school.

Unlike my dad, however, music for me was a purely personal endeavor. I had no innate desire to perform, no willingness to make my life as a starving (or trust-funded, as my mom offered to bankroll me) artist. I wanted to earn my own money, and I wanted to make my own way in the world.

Aside from that, artist-types bothered me. Through my dad, I had met one too many shiftless musicians, and their narcissistic relationships with "my music" irked me to no end. It was their justification for leaving wives, children, jobs, and numerous other responsibilities behind. I thanked my lucky stars every day of my life that despite his complete and utter devotion to music, my dad, no matter his weaknesses, was the

kind of man who was always there. There were a lot of other piano players who wouldn't have stuck around.

Much like, of course, my mother. Janette Chambers was the definition of the flaky artist, although she had never had to forsake her comfort in favor of her art. Despite an Upper East Side inheritance that gave her every comfort in life, Janette still managed to toss off the confines of family in order to discover herself at art school. The fact that she, just like all of those other musical bums, deserted her family not once but multiple times in favor of her "art" just added fuel to my desire to be nothing like her.

However, since I did end up swallowing my pride enough to let her pay for college and save my dad a lot of debt, NYU proved to be a good compromise when I decided to study both music and business. In the end, I was grateful for the opportunity to learn from such amazing instructors. Though I only performed when I absolutely had to (or with my dad), the piano, with its mix of discipline and sublime beauty, would always offer solace no matter what I was doing.

The piano in the basement of my building wasn't tuned, and probably hadn't been dusted in years. But there was no one in the basement lounge at this time on a Sunday, and giving me the freedom to lose myself for a bit. I pulled out one of the pieces of music I had brought and set it on the stand. After running through a few brief scales to warm up my fingers, I took a breath and began.

I played for more than two solid hours. I played old pieces and mustered my way through a few new ones. I played until my fingers were sore from being so out of shape, and I played

until the tendons in my hands ached from the strain of stretching over the keys. I played and played and played, until finally, I looked at my watch and realized it was close to midnight.

My head was clear for the first time in weeks. I had to make more time for this. I had to.

With a quiet, exhausted sigh of contentment, I pushed back from the piano and collected my music from the stand. It wasn't until I turned around to make my way back through the lounge that I realized I had company, and probably had for a long time.

My jaw dropped as I beheld his lanky figure, long legs splayed in front of him as his head leaned against the wall and both arms stretched across the back of the sofa. A long, deep snore erupted from his lips. Brandon Sterling was sound asleep in my basement.

~

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Chapter 17

He was adorable. He couldn't help it. Brandon's head was tipped backward and his mouth was wide open as he slept, dark blond hair curling around his ruddy features and the tiny lines around his eyes erased in his state of complete relaxation. He was dressed comfortably in a maroon Henley shirt that hugged his chest and biceps perfectly, and a pair of dark jeans slouched around scuffed brown boots. A scarf, hat, and goose-down parka had slipped to the floor by his feet. Were it not for the obviously expensive watch on his wrist, he might have actually fit in with the students.

He looked so innocent sleeping there. Once again, I started to wonder if I had been too hasty in leaving him there on the tarmac.

Another massive snore erupted from the back of his throat, causing me to break my own silence with a giggle. Immediately, he woke up, tossing his head around as if looking for someone.

"What, who now?" he blurted out, causing me to giggle again. When his sleepy gaze landed on me, it softened visibly, and I immediately felt a familiar throb between my legs.

"Hey, Red," he said groggily as he sat up from the crushed sofa cushions and rubbed a hand blearily over his face.

I stifled a smile at the nickname. I wasn't sure I wanted him to know I liked it.

"Hey yourself," I replied warily. "You looked pretty comfortable. I'm sorry you had to wake up."

He gave a warm smile fraught with sheepish charm that caused my insides to melt a little bit. I wondered if he knew the effect his smiles had on me. He had to. There was no way he didn't know.

"I forgot you wear glasses," he said.

I raised a hand self-consciously to the edge of my thick frames and smarted slightly. "Yeah. Sometimes I don't feel like putting in contacts."

"You look cute in them," he said with another small smile, this one cautiously flirtatious. "I remember thinking that last time I saw them."

He was nervous. It was utterly disarming. I tried to ignore the flutter that rose in my belly at his words. I fixed a blank look on my face, praying I wouldn't blush and betray the treacherous thoughts flying through my mind. "How did you get in?"

He shrugged, but I could see his shoulders tense up. "It wasn't that hard to follow someone in and pretend I was a student. I wish you had better security in this building, Red. Especially since you're hanging out in soundproofed basements by yourself at night."

I raised an eyebrow. I didn't need him to hassle me every damn minute about my safety. Controlling much?

"I, um, brought you this," he said, interrupting my negative train of thought.

He pulled a telltale, robin's egg-blue box tied with a white ribbon from the pocket of his jacket and held it out to me. The was slightly too big to contain what usually made girls in

movies go crazy, but it obviously held some expensive trinket. A bracelet, maybe. Or a small pendant. It was exactly the box Patrick would have given me after he fucked up.

Just like that, the flutter was gone.

I glared the box for a moment with a frown, but refused to take it, forcing him to set it on the coffee table in front of him. When I looked back up at him, his eyes were wide, guileless, waiting hesitantly for my reaction.

I sighed. Maybe I wasn't opposed to knowing him, but these kinds of things made it impossible to date him. "What are you doing here, Brandon?"

He pressed his lips into a crooked line and frowned, confused. "Well, I was listening to some gorgeous piano playing. I knew you only play for fun, but damn, Red. I think you might have chosen the wrong profession."

I crossed my arms and leaned against the closed top of the piano behind me, determined not to be distracted. "Don't change the subject."

He sighed and leaned forward onto his knees, using one hand to brush away the hair curling over his forehead.

"I take back what I said about your potential as a litigator," he said dryly. "I suspect you'd make any witness on the stand sweat bullets with that glare."

I didn't blink. "Just answer the question."

"Can't be distracted either." He sighed again and looked up with an expression that had morphed to a curious mix of desire and sorrow. I found myself gripping the edge of the piano to prevent myself from crossing the room to sit next to

him. Or straddle him. Or, as I noticed the blue box again, smack him. Visions of what he had done to me in my apartment flew through my mind, and I crossed my legs tightly. His eyes zeroed in on the slight movement, and that his impish half-smile spread slowly across his face. Yeah, he knew exactly what kind of effect he had on women.

“Something on your mind, Red?” he purred.

“Brandon,” I said sharply, ignoring the heat building at my core. “Answer the fucking question. Or I’m leaving.”

He huffed petulantly and leaned back again into the couch. “Fine. I’m here to see you. Obviously.”

“Okay. I’ll be more specific. Why are you stalking me in my dormitory at midnight on a Sunday night? I haven’t seen or heard from you in over a week. I told you explicitly not to contact me again. And now you sneak in here bearing gifts? It’s creepy.”

He nodded, as if in agreement. “Yeah. Well. I wasn’t going to do it. I wasn’t even going to call you again after that shit you pulled at the airport. I’ve never been treated like that by anyone, especially not by people I take to Paris.”

“So you *have* done that before!” I triumphed with a finger pointed at him. “I fucking knew that was game!”

“Ah, shit! No, that’s not what I meant!” He exploded forward, slamming his hands onto his knees. “A, I told you I’m shit at dating. I’m sorry I got it wrong. I seem to keep doing that with you, don’t I? But B, you deserve the best I can offer. A charter to Paris for the evening or a weekend away in

Barbados. Why shouldn't you take it? It's not like you get these kinds of things tossed your way all the time."

"And how would you know that?" I snarled.

Was he really pissed just because I wouldn't take his stupid, moneyed bait? Because I wasn't willing to drop my panties at the sight of an outrageously expensive jet or a Tiffany's box? I conveniently ignored the fact that I had already done so without the gifts.

"Is it the same way you found out I lived in Paris for a year? Or the same way you figured out my address? You've managed to learn all these things about me before I even told you about them, but since you don't actually talk directly *to* me, you don't know a fucking thing about what I actually care about! I suppose I should be oh-so grateful to receive such generosity from you, right?"

I punctuated the last comment with a sarcastically mimed kowtow, but his only response was a withering look that only infuriated me more.

"1809 K Street, Brooklyn," he recited. "Last date of purchase was in 1949 for just under seven grand. No known remodels since then, although I hope for your family's sake you at least bought a better refrigerator."

Before I could bite back a reply, he continued. "I've seen where you grew up, Skylar, because you let me walk you there. Yes, I looked up the information, because I make it a habit to look up new people in my life. It's sort of become a habit in my life since people regularly try to scam *me*." He sighed. "I met your dad, and it wasn't even our first date. You haven't even let me *have* a fucking first date with you! But as

for the gifts, I think I know at least a little something about where you come from. Maybe I'm off, but last I checked, city garbage collectors who moonlight as broke jazz musicians don't exactly make bank, not for New York, and I doubt your Grandpa, a disabled cop and gambling addict, made a whole lot more."

I glared, seething from where I stood. "You don't know the first thing about me or my family. You spent a couple of hours tagging along with me in my old neighborhood, had some PI look into my history, and you think you know everything about me? Let's just be honest here, Brandon. To you I'm just some piece of ass you want to slum it with for a while, and you want to know what you're risking. What's next after the trip, huh? You gonna set me up with a nice condo on Beacon Hill, like you promised, baby? Give me a black Amex to go shopping on Newberry? It's a no-win situation for me. If I say no, I'm a frigid bitch, and if I say yes, I'm just a gold-digging whore. You've never once thought that I just want to go out on a date with you like a *normal fucking person!*"

He winced visibly at my last words and shook his head. "I promise you, I do not think of you that way, Skylar." He grimaced, suddenly mad all over again. "Besides, I have some money, and I like to share it. So what does it matter if I would do any of those things for you? It's no different from one of your law school buddies buying you a beer. It doesn't fucking matter to me! Plus, it's not like you'd take them for the gifts they'd be anyway!"

"That's because they're fuckin' insulting!" I was glad that we were in the basement of the building and not where my classmates could easily hear me exploding, Brooklyn accent

and all, through the thin walls of the complex. “I’m not your *Pretty Woman*, Brandon! I’m not some townie who’s looking for a sugar daddy! This might come as a surprise to you, but your money doesn’t fuckin’ impress me!”

Brandon shot out of his seat then, and stalked toward me like a big cat he resembled so strongly at times. With his thick halo of golden hair, blond stubble, and ferocious expression, he was the spitting image of a lion in his prime. I fought the urge to cower as he approached close enough to brace his hands on the top of the piano behind me, forcing me to crane my neck to look up at him, emphasizing just how much taller than me he really was.

“Then what does impress you, Skylar?” he asked, his voice low, and so quiet that I had to strain to hear him. “Most people are falling over themselves the minute they enter my house. You practically sprinted out of there. Most women would jump at the chance to be swept off to Paris for the night, but you slapped me in the face. Most girls would have torn into a Tiffany’s box like a fat kid at in a candy store. But you won’t even touch it. So what’s gonna do it? How do I get in there?”

He pushed one large finger into my chest, forcing me to lean back more into the edge of the piano. His Boston accent had started to emerge more and more as his frustration mounted, echoing my own more prominent Brooklyn cadence that had emerged in my anger. For a brief moment, I could see him as a young kid, living in one of the shitty row houses in Dorchester. Tired. Hungry. Bruised. Alone.

“Why do you want to know so badly?” My voice was smaller than I wanted it to be, and I struggled to maintain eye contact. He smelled so good this close, and I wanted more than anything to yank his face down to mine and kiss him with everything I had. All of this melted away when we touched each other; it would be so easy... If I weren’t trying to stand my ground, maybe I would have done it.

He sighed again, then leaned in slowly and carefully. He pressed his forehead softly into mine.

“I can’t stop,” he whispered hoarsely with his eyes closed. “I can’t stop thinking about you. I can’t explain it but...I know you feel it too, don’t you? This connection? I walked into my house three weeks ago with a couple of colleagues, expecting to talk business over brandy and bore myself to sleep. Instead I felt like I had been thrown under water when I saw you sitting at my window. I couldn’t fuckin’ breathe, you were so beautiful.” His hands floated to clasp my face gently as he pulled away just enough to meet my eyes. “You felt it too, didn’t you?”

We stood there for at least five full seconds in complete silence, staring each other down, sizing each other up, blue eyes to green, blond head leaning down to blazing red. He looked so vulnerable, this savvy businessman, the most cutthroat attorney in Boston, big time venture capitalist, freaking out like a child. His eyes were desperate, searching my face for some sign of recognition that he wasn’t going crazy. I gulped.

“Yeah,” I finally answered. The admission was like a dam had been released, and my hands slipped up to rest on his

shoulders as if by their own accord. “Yes. I feel it too.”

He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead again into mine as he exhaled a long, audible sigh of relief through his nose.

“Thank God,” he breathed just before pulling my face to meet his own in a long, sweet lingering kiss. My hands instinctively rose to tangle themselves in his hair, already a mess from his hands running through it while we fought.

After several minutes, he finally pulled away and leaned back against wall next to me, leaving me barely perched on the edge of the piano. I slid off it, breathing heavily beside him. One of his hands lingered on my waist, as if he couldn’t bear to break our contact.

“I’m sorry,” he said, pushing one hand back through his hair. “I don’t know how to do this.”

“Yeah, you’ve said that. It’s...getting old. You make it sound like you’ve never been with a woman before, but I know that’s not true.”

He rolled his eyes. “Jesus, Red, no. I’ve been with plenty.”

I fought my inward cringe at the idea of him screwing half of Boston, and made myself nod. “Yeah, I *know*. It’s kind of obvious.”

“Don’t be like that,” he said with a brief frown. “I just haven’t tried to be close to anyone. Not for a really long time. I told you, my life has been my work pretty much since I finished law school and started the firm and my company. That was...well, it was a while ago. I haven’t had time for a relationship. I haven’t wanted one. Not until I met you.”

He ran a hand again through his hair again, and I fought the urge to grab his hands just to calm him down.

“How do I explain it without sounding like a pushy psycho?” he asked with a rueful half-grin.

“Oh, I think you crossed that line a while ago.”

His expression grew suddenly serious. “I’m not crazy, Skylar. I’m just at a loss here. My life...it hasn’t always been that great. I just wanted things to be like...the movies, you know? Like a dream. Because by the time I invited you to stay the night at my house, I already felt like I was dreaming. I wanted you to feel that way. I suppose I thought things like that,” he gestured helplessly back at the box on the table, “would help.”

I cocked my head, surveying him. He seemed so earnest; it was getting harder and harder to doubt him. I realized I didn’t want to doubt him anymore. I just wanted to let him in.

“Well,” I said finally. “It won’t.”

“Because it’s a game?”

“Because it’s manipulative,” I agreed. “And because it’s not what I want. The only place I like to play games is in the bedroom.”

“Oh, really?” His grin widened at me lasciviously, but I swatted him back.

“I’m being serious,” I said. “Are you?”

He was quiet for a moment, then looked up at me, all joking firmly set aside.

“Will you tell me what you want?” he asked, his eyes tired and pleading. “So I don’t fuck this up again? I’m running out of chances here.”

I smiled, and reached out to touch his cheek. He immediately turned into my hand, pressing his face into my palm with a sweet caress.

“I just want you,” I said plainly, feeling my heart dance a bit just at the simple acknowledgment. A weight I’d been carrying for the last several weeks lifted. I shouldn’t have fought the truth of it for as long as I had. “I want to know who you are. What’s important to you. What bothers you. What entertains you. What you hate. What you love. And I want you to learn those things about me by earning my trust, not by having some weirdo compile a file on me and my family.”

“It wasn’t a weirdo,” he interrupted lamely. “I just made a couple of calls, and the sale of house is on public record. Even I have limits, you know.”

I just folded my arms and stared at him. “You follow me or not, Sterling?”

He stared back at me for a minute, and I searched his features, trying to read them. Just when I was about to turn away, he nodded.

“Okay,” he said. “I can try to do that.”

He pushed off the wall and took my hand, leading me down the hall and up the stairs to the lobby, where he turned to face me again.

“Will you give me a chance to make it up to you?”

I pursed my lips. “I think that could be possible.”

“Will Friday work? I have to go out of town on Saturday, and I’ll be gone for a week. I don’t want to wait until I get back”

Friday. Shit. I’d already agreed to a date with Jared. Whose lips felt a little like rubber and whose hands felt like wooden tongs.

“Sure,” I said. “I can do that.”

Brandon breathed an audible sigh of relief, and leaned down and kissed me lightly, this time only on the cheek.

“Eight o’clock, then. I’ll pick you up here,” he said, and turned to leave.

I watched him walk out to the street, and it wasn’t until he was about to duck into the Mercedes that I remembered something.

“Wait! Brandon!” I called as I pushed open the thick glass door.

He turned, alarmed.

“Your, ah, present! You left it on the table downstairs. I’ll run and grab it for you.”

He shrugged, and waved my offer away.

“Keep it,” he said. “Sell it if you want and pay your rent. Or leave it for someone else to find. You were right about it anyway.”

Was he serious? He wanted me to forget about a gift that likely cost him thousands of dollars?

“Red,” he called softly. I looked back at him.

“The next time I give you a gift, you can bet it’ll be for *you*,” he said. “I’d prefer it if *that’s* the first one you get.”

And with that, he slid into the back seat of the car and rumbled away, leaving me wondering what kind of gift that special might be in my future.

~

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Chapter 18

I arrived to the FLS offices a bit early on Wednesday with an extra bounce in my step, though I tried to tell myself it was because I had a check for twenty-eight thousand dollars in my purse to donate and not because my second first real date with Brandon was in two days.

“Wow.” Kieran peered at the check with both of her finely tweezed eyebrows raised nearly to her hairline. “Are you sure about this? I know you’re not like most of these Harvard brats, Skylar. No doubt you could use the money, if just to put toward your student loans.”

I pursed my lips and shrugged. Kieran knew where I was from, but not about my small trust fund. “I’m sure. I got it for a piece of jewelry that was...well, let’s just say I got it under false pretenses. The person who gave it to me doesn’t want it back, and I’d prefer not to keep it myself.”

I ventured a small smile, though the knowing look on Kieran’s face caused an unwelcome flush to rise on mine. She raised one thin eyebrow and looked back down at the check. Then she set it down on her desk and pulled a pad of paper out from a drawer. After scribbling a moment, she ripped off the top sheet and handed it across the desk to me.

“You’ll want that receipt for your taxes,” she said as she turned to her computer. “You’ll save more from the exemption than you would not declaring the jewelry.”

I nodded and tucked the receipt into my purse before going to sit at my small desk. Just then, my phone buzzed with

a text message from a number I didn't recognize.

310-555-2368: I forgot to say you looked gorgeous on Sunday.

I grinned. I had been dressed in yoga pants and a crappy shirt.

Me: Who is this?

310-555-2368: You don't know?

I turned to face my desk, biting back another telltale grin in case Kieran was watching. I still had a few minutes before my shift started, but she didn't need to see me all worked up like smitten schoolgirl. I decided to have some fun.

Me: Ooohhh, Jake, you need to stop using those online text services, baby.

310-555-2368: WHO THE FUCK IS JAKE?

I sucked in a giggle, but Kieran didn't seem to notice.

Me: Oh, just this other hotshot tycoon I'm seeing. He likes to give me consolation jewelry too.

310-555-2368: Hilarious. I'm rolling over here.

Me: I know. It's part of my charm. How did you get my number?

310-555-2368: I offered Ana a raise to get it from your friend. She really took advantage of me.

Me: Oh?

310-555-2368: Yeah, she makes more than me now.

This time I couldn't quite stifle the giggle.

Kieran looked up irritably from her work. “Something funny?”

I shook my head and set my phone down on the desk. “No, sorry. Just a friend’s text.”

She looked at the clock, which read 8:51. “I see.”

Grateful she didn’t reprimand me before I had actually done anything wrong, I punched in a quick message.

Me: Why do you have a California number? I thought you were from Boston.

310-555-2368: This is a Google Voice number, just like yours. I’m texting from my office. I should be working, but you’re distracting me.

Before I could come up with a pithy reply that would somehow request his actual number, my phone buzzed again.

310-555-2368: Anyway, just wanted to say I can’t wait to see you on Friday. Thanks for the third chance. Later, Red.

The affectionate nickname wasn’t anything I (and every other redhead) hadn’t heard before, but somehow the familiarity of way he used it, the way it sounded like he’d called me that for years, made me smile. I typed in a quick farewell, and tucked my phone back into my purse before logging onto my computer and pulling two files I had been working on from Monday. I had several calls to make on one client’s behalf, so I needed to get to work.

“It’s funny. I know someone who always gives expensive jewelry like that to women he dates.”

I jerked my head up to find Kieran peering at me from over a brief, wry amusement playing across her sharp features.

She pointed a pen at me as she spoke. “Usually before he even knows them very well.” She shrugged. “I always tell him that will make the good ones feel like prostitutes, but he never listens. He was planning to do it again last week even though I told him not to.”

I gulped and set my file on the desk so I could face her. “Who’s that?”

“Something tells me you know,” she said, holding up the check.

I blinked, not entirely sure what she wanted me to say. I liked Kieran, but I didn’t want her getting the wrong idea about Brandon and me.

She sat back in her chair and set the check on the table. “Relax, Skylar. He’s not your boss any more. And FLS has never been too good for his money anyway.”

Somehow, I found her command difficult to obey. Her pointed expression across the desk was already intimidating, and I couldn’t tell if she approved or not that I was dating her friend. I still remembered her laser-like expression at his house that first night; I had also already seen her in action when she went after particularly nasty opponents in court. Kieran’s wrath was not something I wanted to be on the wrong side of.

“Look, I really couldn’t care less about your personal life, Skylar,” she said as she tapped a long fingernail on her keyboard. “But Brandon is a different story. He’s like a brother

to me. A good guy, but he's...complicated. And he doesn't need anyone who will add to that in his life. So be careful."

She looked up at me, and her dark eyes zeroed in on mine directly, holding me to my chair. It was obvious why Kieran was such a successful litigator; I couldn't imagine anyone actually lying to her or doing anything other than cowering in front of her on the stand.

"We clear?" she asked.

Wordlessly, I nodded, although I couldn't be less clear. Was she warning me off him? Was she trying to help? Her sharp expression was even more inscrutable than usual, red mouth set in an impassive line as she stared at me.

"Of...of course," I finally managed to croak under her unwavering gaze.

Her lips quirked up at the sides, but it wasn't quite a smile. "Well, this was a good start," she said, holding up the check again.

I smiled back, although I wasn't sure what she meant. Finally, she turned back to her computer, and suddenly it was as if our awkward conversation hadn't happened.

~

"What about this one?"

Jane yanked a bright blue dress off a hanger that was so short it looked more like a skirt. She held it up against her slim body and swished it playfully from side to side.

My face immediately torqued up in disgust. "Are you kidding? That's not a dress, it's lingerie."

“It’s hot and you’d look hot in it. Didn’t he tell you he liked your legs?”

“Yes, but—”

“Well, one look at you in this, and he’ll actually fuck you on the piano this time. Or maybe in the backseat of his car. Is his driver a perv? Do you think he’d watch?”

“I really need to stop telling you everything about my sex life.”

I blushed, glancing around the small boutique to see if anyone had heard her. Luckily it was almost closing time, so the small shop was nearly empty, and if the girl at the register had heard us, she was doing a really good job of acting like she hadn’t.

I grabbed the dress—if you could even call it that—from Jane and shoved it back on the rack. “He promised nothing fancy. Less call girl, more girl next door.”

“Who are you, his kid sister? What did you ask me here for?” Jane grabbed back at the long gray cardigan currently hanging from my arm and tossed it over a piled of go-back clothes by the dressing room.

“Hey, I liked that!”

“I don’t care if he’s taking you out to a taco truck, lady!” Jane said, blocking my reach with her body. “It’s a date, not tea with my Great-Aunt Meg. If you want to go cazh, that’s fine, but I’m not letting you go on this date without sexing it up a little bit. No cardigans!”

“Fine, fine. No, not that. Jesus, Jane, this isn’t Vegas! It’s twenty-eight degrees outside.”

Before I could finish vetoing her next choice—an indecently low cut halter-top littered with sequins—my handbag interrupted our sparring with a loud vibration. I yanked my cell phone and answered it without checking who it was, shaking my head violently at Jane. “Hello?”

“Hey, Skylar. It’s Jared.”

I froze and stuck my tongue out at Jane when she asked silently who it was. “Oh, hi, Jared. What’s up?” Immediately Jane’s lips rounded in a silent “Oh!” of recognition, and she tiptoed away to the other side of the store to look at the options over there.

“I was just wondering if you’d gotten any of my texts this week,” Jared said. “I was hoping we were still on for our date tomorrow.”

Shit. I’d completely forgotten about that, and now here I was out shopping for the date I was going on with someone else instead. I’d been dodging Jared’s texts all week, sending noncommittal promise to get back to him later.

“Oh, yeah, um, about that…” I mumbled, trying ineffectively to come up with a reasonable excuse that wouldn’t make me into a massive liar. Jared was a nice guy. He didn’t deserve to have the wool pulled over his eyes, although I didn’t think he needed the absolute truth either. No one really wants to be told they’re just not that interesting.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” I mumbled as I flipped through a sale rack of t-shirts before moving to another area of the store. Jane was starting to meander closer, clearly interested in what I was

going to say. Excuse, excuse, I needed a decent excuse not to see him again. “I’m just really busy these days. I still don’t have a job offer, so I’ve doing some networking stuff and working extra hours at the clinic...”

From the other side of a tall rack of jumpsuits came a pronounced snort.

“Tell him his kissing was like making out with a block of tofu,” Jane whispered loudly, suddenly beside me again. She held up a black silk blouse with a drawstring collar. I waved her away, but pointed at the shirt and gave a thumbs up.

“Who was that?” Jared asked.

“Ah, no one. TV. But, yeah, I was saying that, um...I just don’t think I’m going to be able to make it out any time soon.”

“Really? You can’t even get dinner? Everyone has to eat, don’t they?” His tone was friendly, but I thought I caught a hint of irritation. I understood it, but I didn’t like being pushed. These were pretty clear signals I was giving him.

“I’m really sorry, Jared,” I said, trying and failing to keep my voice from tightening a bit. “I’m just swamped. Maybe another time.”

“Yeah, another *lifetime*,” Jane muttered to a rack full of wrap dresses.

“Okay, I guess,” Jared said, his voice full of disappointment. To his credit, he was trying to be nice. “I hope you get everything done. Let me know when your schedule frees up, okay?”

“Will do,” I said. “Bye.” I tucked my phone back in my purse and then turned to Jane. “What is with you? I thought

you liked him.” I swatted ineffectually at her with my purse, which she neatly dodged.

“I liked the idea of you going on a date,” she corrected me. “Our toaster was getting more action than you do. And we don’t even eat that much toast.” She handed me three more shirts she’d been holding. Since none of them were cut to my navel, I draped them over my arm.

“And now?” I couldn’t help the sly grin creeping its way across my face.

“Well, now you’ve got Mr. Tall, Blond, and Eat Me Out for Breakfast. Why would you keep a guy with the soggy oatmeal personality when you’ve got a giant plate of sizzling bacon ready for you?” She shook her head. “Didn’t you say kissing him was like kissing a cold fish?”

I shrugged, unwilling to meet her gaze as we walked to the small dressing room in the corner of the shop. “I think it was cold cuts, not cold fish.”

“Oh. Yeah. Making out with bologna sandwich sounds so much more enticing.”

I chuckled as I dropped my things inside the small dressing room and pulled the curtain closed while Jane stood outside, continuing her tirade. Judging from the noises I had heard all too often coming out of her bedroom, she suffered no such lackluster connections.

“He doesn’t deserve to be told off or anything. What would you have had me say?” I asked while tugging on one of the tops. The purple shade washed me out. Nope.

“Well, if it were me,” Jane said, “I probably would have said something along the lines of, sorry, Jared, I can’t go out tomorrow because you have the personality of a Toyota Camry.”

I burst out laughing in spite of myself. “Well, I already turned him down, didn’t I?”

“Or sorry, Jared, I’d rather take the LSAT four more times in the same day than kiss you again.”

I pulled on another top and immediately discarded it, although it was hard to get it off while laughing again. “You’re terrible,” I chided my friend before tugging the last shirt, the black one, over my head.

“You want me to keep going?” Jane asked. “I have so many more. I’d rather wear head to toe beige. Have lunch with a room full of insurance salesmen. Attend a mayonnaise convention!”

“Stop!” I cried, now that tears were starting to stream down my face. “I...can’t....you...stop!”

Jane tugged the flimsy curtain aside to find me squatting on the floor, holding my side while I heaved silent. She grinned and grabbed my arm to pull me up. “You know it’s true.”

“Oh, he’s better than that,” I gasped as I straightened myself up. “I mean, he’s cute and he’s nice. That’s got to make him better than an ugly family car.”

Jane tipped her head from side to side, considering the metaphor more carefully. “Okay, but just because he’s objectively handsome in a Gap ad kind of way, and also

because he's objectively loaded. So...maybe he's a Saab. A nice, well made, sensible Saab. God, even the car name sounds boring, doesn't it?"

I giggled again. "Don't start again, Jane." It was one of the things I loved about living with her—she could always, always make me laugh.

"Saaaaaab," she droned, but shut the curtain again to let me finish getting dressed. I quickly put on my clothes and gathered the black shirt and hanger to bring up to the front.

"Ooh, I'm glad you went with that one, even if it means your closet stays monochromatic," Jane said as we walked up to the cash register.

"Like you're one to talk," I retorted. When she wasn't dressing professionally, Jane's look usually consisted of torn skinny jeans and a rotating series of black concert tees.

"Did you find something you like?" asked the salesgirl.

I handed her the silk blouse and a pair of earrings I snagged by the counter. "I think so. I hope so."

"This blouse is super sexy," she said with a sly wink. "I'm sure he'll love it. The, um, bacon, not the oatmeal."

Jane and I traded glances and broke into another round of giggles. Apparently the salesgirl had been listening after all.

~

Chapter 19

Between my class work and starting work on the clinic presentations, the rest of the week flew by. Brandon and I traded a few more flirtatious texts (always via Google, much to my irritation—I was fairly certain it was punishment for not providing my number on my original application), and solidified our plans together. On Friday evening, I raced into the apartment with just under an hour to get ready. I had stayed late at the clinic helping Kieran with a particularly challenging client, and the T had been delayed on top of that.

Jared had called two more times on Thursday, but I hadn't found the time to call him back, instead opting to send a quick text begging a busy weekend of studying. I didn't normally like to lie, but something told me he would be the kind of guy who'd want to turn a "Dear John" conversation into a big long thing. I had other things on my mind.

I dropped my briefcase by the door, kicked off the sensible black pumps that were suitable for walking through the fog settled over Boston that day, and raced down the hallway to my bedroom. After I tore off my gray suit jacket and pants and tossed them on the bed, I wrapped my robe around myself and padded back to the bathroom, only to find it locked with the shower running. Jane was in there, and clearly not alone.

A telltale giggle slipped out from the bathroom door, followed by a grunt that couldn't possibly be female. I frowned. I glanced at the hallway mirror at my reflection, which was about as frazzled as I felt. My hair was half falling out of its bun and about a million frizzy flyaways created a red-orange

mane all around my face. Mascara was smudged beneath one eye, and light sheen of sweat glistened across my brow.

I turned back to the bathroom and banged on the door. “Jane! I need to use the bathroom.”

A deep male voice murmured something in response to Jane’s higher voice, and I listened as someone came padding toward the door. It opened, and Jane stuck her very wet head out, water running down her neck to where she held a towel against the rest of her body.

“Dude!” she growled. “I’m a little occupied here. Do you think you could wait?”

“Dude yourself!” I hissed back. “I have a date tonight. An important date. You know this. And he’s coming in—” I glanced down at my watch— “forty-seven minutes and I look like I just got dragged through a gutter!”

Her eyes blinked wide with sudden recognition. “Oh shit, I’m sorry! I totally forgot. We’ll be out in two seconds.”

Without waiting for a response, she shut the door quickly in my face, and I heard her muffled voice speaking to her obviously disappointed partner. Within a minute, the water shut off, and the bathroom door opened. Jane shuffled out, still clad in her towel, followed by a tall, thin guy with shaggy blond hair who held my green bath towel around his waist. Gross.

“Uh, Sky, this is Greg,” Jane said sheepishly as they shuffled down the hall. “Greg, Skylar.”

Greg pushed his wet hair out of his eyes and tipped his chin at me. “What’s up, roommate?”

I glared at him. “That’s my towel.”

He looked down, dripping water from his hair onto his big feet, then looked back up with a horsey grin. “Oh, sorry, man. You want it back?”

I rolled my eyes and looked at Jane, who was standing coyly in her bedroom doorway. “No, I’ll find another. You guys better not have left any of your...remnants in the shower.”

“Don’t worry, Sky. We were just getting clean, that’s all.” Jane reached out, clasped Greg’s hand, and tugged him behind her into her room. “Have a good shower!”

The door shut behind them, and I pull a clean towel from the hall closet before ducking into the bathroom with a spray bottle of Lysol. Immediately I turned on the water so I wouldn’t have to listen to the giggling coming from Jane’s room again and jumped into the shower as soon as I had scrubbed them off the cracked porcelain tub.

~

This time I was waiting outside of my building when Brandon pulled up. Even though I was excited for this date, I opted for a more comfortable look instead of getting as dolled up as I had last time. Jane’s fairly loud recreational activities hadn’t done much to distract me from the sexual yearning I now felt coursing through my body, a fact that irritated me right along with turning me on.

Since I wasn’t planning to repeat the last time Brandon had come to pick me up, I wore clothing that was a lot harder to remove: a pair of black cigarette pants, a black, silk blouse

that hung provocatively off one shoulder, and black ankle boots that Jane affectionately called my “shit-kickers.” I was tucked cozily into my wide-collared, black wool trench coat, and my hair, which I had only had time to dry at the roots, now lay about my shoulders in natural, haphazard waves that were still frizzing just a bit around the crown of my head. I normally didn’t wear a lot of makeup anyway, but I had taken the time to line my eyelids and apply a few coats of mascara to make my green eyes pop. I felt confident. And still fairly hard up.

“Hi David,” I said to Brandon’s driver as he stepped out of the car and opened the back door for me.

“Ms. Crosby,” he replied with a brief nod. I slid in to the backseat, and he closed the door behind me, enclosing me with the car’s other occupant.

As soon as I saw him, I wondered briefly if I had forgotten just how gorgeous he was in six short days. Because I immediately my libido went from simmering to almost boiling over. Was going to be like this every time I saw him again?

Like me, Brandon had also gone substantially more casual for this date, likely predicated on my request to simply get to know him. He was only slightly more dressed up than the last time I saw him, wearing a light gray Oxford shirt over his dark jeans instead of a Henley, his dirty blond hair combed back in soft waves instead of mussed around his face. Finished with a navy wool pea coat and his brown boots, he looked sexy, polished, and relaxed all at the same time.

“Red.”

His deep voice rumbled in greeting as he leaned over to kiss me gently on the cheek. The combination of men’s

aftershave, a slightly almond scent, and that something else that was entirely just Brandon made my toes curl in my boots as our cheeks brushed together. As he sat back, he tucked a strand of my hair back behind my ear with a shy smile.

“Gorgeous as always,” he said.

We stared at each other, suddenly caught in the spell of each other’s presence. The longer I looked into those bright blue eyes, the more the memory of his last kiss burned itself into my brain. Was he thinking the same thing? Just as I was about to launch myself at Brandon, David awkwardly cleared his throat from the front seat. Shit! I had completely forgotten about the driver!

“Ah, where to, sir?” he asked.

Brandon jerked his head towards the front of the car, as if he had also forgotten about David’s presence. “Ah, Mass Ave to Albany, please. Thanks, David.”

I looked out the window as the car began to move, pressing my nose lightly on the cold glass. If this were a normal date, we might have been lost in each other as some anonymous cab driver took us to our destination; or, even better, we could have walked by ourselves to the train and enjoyed each other along the way in dark corners made for kissing. Did dating someone with this much money mean there would always be someone to witness our intimate moments?

Brandon reached a gloved hand out and took my fingers in his. I turned back to look at him, and the crooked smile on his face wiped away all negative thoughts. He was clearly so glad to be there with me, and I felt the same. It was better to take it somewhat slow, I told myself. Right?

~

He had promised me earlier that he'd planned a special date, but that it wouldn't be anything too fancy—just that we'd be going someplace important to him and that we'd definitely stay in the city. So when the car pulled onto a familiar road off Kendall Square and stopped amidst the darkened buildings of a college campus, I turned to face Brandon curiously.

“You're taking me to MIT for our first date?”

He shrugged as the car stopped. “I got it, David,” he said, stepping out from his side and jogging around to open by door before I could get to it. He told David he would call when we needed a ride again, and then held out his hand to pull me out of the car with a smile.

“You wanted to know me,” he said as he shut the car door. The Mercedes sped off down around the campus road, and was soon out of sight. “Well, this is where I spent most of my time between the ages of twelve and eighteen.”

He tucked my hand into the crook of his elbow, and as we walked down the street, he gave me a mini tour of the buildings we passed. There were few students on campus this time of night, although more than one light burned in a few of the strange mish-mashed buildings that surrounded us.

“Right there is the student shop where I used to mess around with the leftover lab equipment while my foster dad taught his labs. And over there is the auditorium where he lectured. I'd sit in the back a lot and do homework. My high school let me take some MIT courses as a non-matriculated student before I graduated. I finished the high school curriculum kind of early.”

I snapped my head to look at him.

“You were taking advanced math classes at MIT when you were in high school? Why didn’t they just skip you a few grades and let you finish early?”

“Well, um, they did.” He gave a bashful half shrug that I would later recognize as signature move of his, one that meant he was slightly embarrassed of an accomplishment only few could reach. “I graduated when I was sixteen.”

I gawked. Brandon was a genius. Like, a legitimate, Einstein-level genius.

“And you went here after?”

He nodded. “Ray—that’s my foster dad’s name—pulled some strings and got me into the Electrical Engineering program.”

“Is that what you majored in?” At this point I wouldn’t have been surprised if Brandon had a degree in astrophysics besides being one of the most powerful lawyers in Boston.

“I thought about it,” he admitted. “But no. The stuff they work on is really cool, but I wanted to do more than just work on unsolvable equations and fiddling with wires all day long. I ended up double majoring in Economics and Finance instead.”

“Because those aren’t numbers-heavy fields,” I remarked dryly.

He snorted. “I know. Ray still thought they were a joke. It was a major beef between us back then. But they seemed more...concrete at the time. I wanted to make some money, and I wanted to do it as quickly as possible.”

It wasn't hard to understand what drove him. He'd grown up with little in the way of stability, going without or depending on the gifts of others his entire life. Middle-class academia had probably seemed like a waste when he knew he could make a lot more money using his skills in the finance sector. His plan, he told me, was to get an M.B.A. after finishing, and game the stock market using an algorithm he'd developed while he was at MIT.

"I'm surprised you didn't work a bit before going to business school," I said, kicking a rock with my toe as we continued past several oddly shaped buildings. It was uncommon for people to pursue M.B.A.'s without some other experience.

"I wanted to," he conceded. "But I wasn't quite twenty when I graduated from here. The small investment firms were nervous about taking me on full time that young, and my foster parents wouldn't agree to let me try my luck with the firms in New York, adult or no. That was when I started investing on my own, in the year before I started business school."

It had been a frustrating year, he told me as he steered me down another campus street that was lined with much taller buildings. Despite having a degree from one of the best schools in the world, he barely got a job as an assistant at a hedge fund downtown while he waited for graduate school to begin.

"I don't blame any of them. Imagine me: an eight feet tall, skin-and-bones teenager with acne, spouting what probably sounded like conspiracy theories about the marketplace." He

chuckled, and his laughter was contagious. “I wouldn’t have hired me either.”

His foster parents, sympathetic to his plight, had allowed him to continue living with them rent-free so he could try his hand at investing the small salary he made.

“They sound like they really believed in you,” I said.

“They’re good people,” Brandon agreed. “I don’t know where I’d be without them. I lived in a few homes before them, but with people who already had about five kids and were just looking to collect welfare.” He looked grim at the memories, but quickly shook them off. “I was supposed to go to a group home when Ray and Susan took me in. They couldn’t have kids of their own, but Susan felt very strongly that they should help kids like me, the older ones who weren’t likely to be adopted.”

“Did they ever have any other kids live with them?”

“Nope,” he said with a lopsided grin. “Just little old me.”

It turned out to be a good investment for them. He ended up calculating a unique algorithm that predicted certain dot-com stock trends with uncanny accuracy, allowing him to triple his paltry minimum wage salary within six months. He also managed to create a retirement for his foster parents within five years, paid his way through graduate school, and came up with enough capital to start his fund by the time he finished law school.

Brandon kicked a stray rock on the ground and shrugged again, suddenly bashful the way only certain men can be when

they are pleased with themselves. I squeezed his arm, although I was still processing the gravity of his accomplishments.

“I’m surprised you didn’t just become the next Gordon Gecko, or whatever,” I said, doing my best to make light of his past despite the fact that I was awestruck and a little worried. I had worked next to wannabe Geckos during my time on Wall Street. I had left that world for a reason.

Brandon just snorted. “It was just a means to an end, and my goals at fifteen, or even nineteen, weren’t really the same ones I had ten or twenty years later. It becomes sad after a while, knowing your only job is basically to play a game—one that’s not that challenging, honestly—with money, a lot of which is legally swindled. I decided pretty quickly after the fund turned a profit that I wanted to contribute something real to the world. I ended up really liking the law for that reason—I like the way justice works in court. Everyone has to be held accountable.”

He started Sterling Grove with one of his old law school classmates initially to represent the interests of some of his investments, but eventually it became the voice of a company that began working with closely held startups, allowing Brandon and his partners to pick and choose projects that, as he put it, actually made something more than just money. Many of those companies were now closely associated with his investment firm, Sterling Ventures.

“I guess you could say I have my fingers in a bunch of different pies now,” he concluded, coming to a stop so he could turn and face me. He pulled my free hand into his other

one and let our arms dangle, connected, while he studied my face.

“Which do you like best?” I asked.

He tipped his head slightly from side to side, weighing the question. “I’m not sure. We funded a couple of instructional design projects that were pretty amazing a few years ago. But lately I’ve been interested more in helping with the research end of some renewable energy ideas that have come my way. There’s this—” He cut himself off abruptly and smile sheepishly. “Actually, Skylar, I can’t really talk about it yet. I trust you and all, but—”

“I get it,” I interrupted, shaking my head although I desperately wanted to know. “Liability. Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s just...sensitive. And if I can put certain pieces into place, it has the potential to change everything about the world we live in.” His voice rang with a passion I hadn’t heard in the rest of his story. “When I can say something, I promise you’ll be the first to know.”

I grinned at him and he grinned back. Then he pursed his lips, looking around at the darkened silhouettes of the buildings that surrounded us and back down at me.

“This is really what you want?” he asked. “Listening to me jabber on and on while we walk around these ugly buildings?”

“Is this who you are?”

“It’s part,” he said simply.

“Then yes,” I replied. “I want to know whatever there is to know about you. I just want the truth.”

He squeezed my hands tightly through our gloves and nodded, then let go of one as he turned toward the building where we had stopped, an unassuming brick box that stood a bit out of the way of the streetlights. It didn't seem like enough to house the brilliance that was undoubtedly inside. We both looked up and down the exterior before looking back at each other.

“Home sweet home,” he said. “So to speak, anyway. Come on, Red. I'm going to introduce you to the man who raised me.”

~

Raymond Petersen's office was at the end of a dreary hall on the fourth floor of the building that housed the Electrical Engineering faculty. A slight, hunched man with thinning gray hair and large glasses across a long nose, he wore the stereotypical professor garb: faded khaki pants and a plaid button down shirt rolled up his forearms. A brown sports coat was tossed over the back of his chair. He was obviously engrossed in some sort of problem, and he didn't stop scratching equations on the notepad at his very messy desk for a least a minute after we entered the cramped office. Although he didn't look the slightest bit out of place in the halls of an Engineering department, it was still a bit jarring to find that the man who had brought up such an incredible person as Brandon Sterling was so utterly unobtrusive.

At last, he reviewed the notations that took up the entire piece of paper, and looked up with a short smile that briefly softened his otherwise plain features.

“Bran.” He pushed back from his roller chair and stepped over multiple piles of library books in order to execute a brief, awkward embrace which his foster son, who towered over him. “This is a surprise.”

“Hey, Ray,” Brandon said as he released his foster father. They both stepped away and eyed each other. I was reminded of a nature show where two wolves circled each other, sniffing. “We were just in the neighborhood and thought we’d catch you after your last class. Susan said you were running a graduate seminar on Friday evenings now.”

Ray turned toward me at the word “we.” “And who is this?” he asked.

“Skylar Crosby, sir,” I say, extending my hand and shaking his warmly. He returned my smile, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. I wondered why.

“Pleasure to meet you,” he said. “Please sit down. Would either of you like some coffee or something else to drink? There might be some dregs left in the pot.” He nodded to a small drip coffee maker on a shelf over his desk.

“I’ll take a beer if you’ve got one,” Brandon said as we both sat into the two small chairs provided for students. “I know you’ve got a few stashed under your desk where Susan won’t find them.”

The legs on Brandon’s creaked audibly as he forced his large frame into the small metal seat. Ray opened his mouth as if to argue the point, but instead he sighed, sat back into his rolling chair, and reached under his desk into a mini refrigerator for said beers.

“Damn woman is on a new health kick. Some Paleo-diet garbage,” he muttered. “I told her there was a reason why cavemen only lived thirty-five years, but she won’t listen to basic science. Would you like one, Skylar?” he asked, holding out three cans of PBR.

I took one, not wanting to be rude, and we all cracked open our beers and sipped them companionably.

“So what does the young lady do?” Ray asked Brandon.

I did my best to hide a frown; it drove me crazy when men talked about women as if they weren’t in the room.

“I’m in law school, Dr. Petersen,” I piped up. “Finishing up my third year.”

He glanced at me, and I noticed a slightly hawkish look behind his thick glasses. “Is that so? I’ve never really thought much of lawyers. Always seemed like a lot of rhetorical posturing nonsense if you ask me.”

Brandon’s grip on the arm of his chair was the only thing that betrayed his response to his foster father’s obvious jab. I wasn’t so good at holding my tongue.

“I don’t know about that, sir,” I said as nonchalantly as I could. “I like to think of us as necessary interpreters of the abstract social boundaries by which our society operates. Without the law, there is chaos. Like John Locke said, ‘Where there is no law, there is no freedom’.”

Ray stared at me for a few seconds before turning back to Brandon. “Is she always like this?”

There he went again. I didn’t care if he was a Fields Medal winner; Raymond Petersen was obviously one of those old

white academics who tended to treat women as if they had half a brain.

“Like what, sir?” I asked politely.

He rewarded me with a quick glance, but continued to address his foster son. “So outspoken?”

“Skylar is at the top of her class at Harvard, Ray,” Brandon replied irritably. “She’s preparing to be a domestic violence advocate when she graduates. I’d say her willingness to challenge others will serve her clients well.” He looked at me and reached over to squeeze my hand, provoking a smile I couldn’t control. “I know I like it.”

Ray blinked between Brandon and me a few times, looking pointedly at our joined hands before focusing back on Brandon.

“So, is everything all right? What’s going on?”

Ray’s eyes continued to flicker between the two of us suspiciously. I took a large gulp of my beer. It was an oddly direct question, particularly in New England, where most folks tended to swath their inquiries in pleasantries and passive aggressive behavior. I glanced at Brandon, who just sighed.

“Nothing’s going on, Ray,” he replied.

“Well, it doesn’t really add up,” Ray said. “You call me or Susan, what, once every few weeks or so? And the only time you usually show up is when you’ve got some sort of personal problem you can’t sort out. Last time it was because that other woman was suing. Is that done with? What’s going on with this girl? Did you get her pregnant? There are clinics that can help you take care of that, you know. You’re thirty-seven,

Bran; I think you need to learn to deal with these things on your own.”

Brandon set his half-full beer can down on the edge of the desk hard enough that a bit of beer spurted out and drifted down the sides. Ray immediately picked it up and wiped the liquid from the table. Brandon stood up and pulled me from my chair with him. I was barely able to set my beer down on Ray’s desk while I was tugged backward toward the office doorway.

“Nothing’s going on, Ray,” he said. “I met someone, and I wanted her to meet you. You’ve met, so we can get out of your hair. That’s it. Tell Susan I said hi. Come on, Skylar.”

“It was nice to meet you, Dr. Petersen,” I offered as I was practically dragged out of the small, book-strewn space.

Ray didn’t look up from his small workspace; he had already dumped our beers in the garbage and had pivoted back to the messy equation on his desk. He held one hand up in farewell and gestured a mock-salute in response.

Brandon turned and left, and with one last glance at the very small man sitting in his very small office, I followed him into the hall.

~

Chapter 20

“Can I ask you something?”

We made our way slowly back down the sober, concrete stairwell, each footstep echoing up the shaft listlessly in a way that I couldn't stand for more than two more seconds.

“What's that?” Brandon asked distantly as he continued to guide me down, one big hand settled lightly at the small of my back.

“What was he talking about, that you need to learn to deal with these things on your own? What things was he talking about?”

Beside me, Brandon sighed. “Your dad and grandma. Do you ever feel like they treat you like a little kid when you're around?”

“Constantly,” I admitted, thinking particularly of Bubbe.

“Well, that's Ray. We didn't get on so well in the beginning, he and I, and he still sees me as the headstrong fuckup they took in, no matter how long it's been.”

“So, the woman he mentioned...”

“Ancient history,” Brandon said quickly. “Seriously. Nothing to worry about.”

We continued to walk until the echoes of the stairwell once again carried too much tension.

“Did the Petersens ever adopt you?” I asked abruptly

Brandon's eyes flashed to me as we approached another flight, and then looked back down the stairwell with a frown. "No."

"Could they have?"

Brandon remained silent as we continued downward, our footsteps filling the gap in the conversation.

"The Petersens were the best parents someone in my position could have hoped for," he said finally. "They took me in, they cared for me, and they let me stay for ten years, well past the time I was a ward of the state. I think that's enough, don't you?"

I didn't, but I wasn't going to say that. It was becoming clear that Ray Petersen had wanted to play some kind of *Good Will Hunting* role in Brandon's life: rescue the brilliant kid from the projects to pad his own accomplishments. Instead, Brandon's desire to go beyond academia had proved a bitter disappointment. Maybe Ray hadn't yet forgiven him for it.

Brandon, on the other hand, deserved to be loved unconditionally—everyone did. I may have only had one flawed parent and a pushy grandmother willing to give that to me, but it was a damn sight more than some kids got. I wasn't sure why Ray Petersen didn't take that extra step. From what I could tell so far, there was a lot to love about their foster son.

We walked the remaining stairs to the bottom of the stairwell in silence again, Brandon a few paces ahead of me. When I was two steps from the bottom, I grabbed Brandon's jacket sleeve, pulling him to stop before he could open the heavy door into the lobby. With my extra twelve inches, our eyes were close to even. There I could see some unnamable

pain he couldn't quite mask, and my heart squeezed as he stared, open and vulnerable, back at me. So much of what he did now made more and more sense. It was all an attempt to make up for what he had missing his entire life.

“What is it, Red?” he asked softly, reaching out one hand to tuck a stray lock away from my face.

For a moment I couldn't speak. I didn't know quite what I wanted to say, but I was moved by his choice to take me here. It couldn't have been easy for him. I wanted to tell Brandon that he deserved to be loved. I wanted to say I could be that person one day if he'd let me in. I wanted to tell him he was amazing when he was content to just be himself.

But instead I just reaching up one hand and mirrored his action as I brushed a few errant strands off his forehead. He was perfectly still, that same, vulnerable expression frozen onto his features as I traced my fingers around his ear and down the strong lines of his stubbled jaw, brushing my thumb gently over his full bottom lip.

“Thank you for taking me here,” I finally whispered. “I'm so...lucky. To know you. You deserve to know that.”

He blinked, obviously confused, but before he could respond, I leaned in and pressed my lips softly into his.

The brief contact sent an immediately shock wave through both of us, but I struggled to hold him close. A few seconds passed, and his lips finally relaxed, responding for a few seconds before he pulled away. I opened my eyes to find him staring at me again, but all traces of vulnerability had disappeared, replaced by something harder.

“Are you trying to fix me, Skylar?” he asked softly.

His blazing stare rendered me motionless, and I couldn't look away.

“No,” I replied, my voice suddenly small. Was I? He had looked so lost in that office, and I had wanted to do...I don't know...*something* to take that feeling away.

He blinked again, slowly.

“I don't need to be fixed,” he said emphatically.

He slid one arm firmly around my waist and jerked me up against him so that I could feel every inch of his iron body from my chest down to my toes. The lost boy was gone, and what had replaced him was a very strong man who could clearly do whatever he wanted with me.

“I don't need...” he trailed off as he buried his nose into my neck, pushing the collar of my sweater off my shoulder so he could nip the edge of my collarbone in a way that made me forget just where I was. He trailed back up, brushing his rough cheek against mine. “To be fixed,” he growled before taking my lips again.

There was no question in his statement at all; he wasn't looking for a rebuke. And before I could protest, his lips were on mine, this time in a deep, forceful kiss that seemed to seep into every nerve ending of my body. His tongue sought entry to my mouth, and as soon as I opened my lips, he twisted it around mine with avarice, pressing into me deeply as if he couldn't taste me enough.

In a few swift movements, Brandon reached around my waist and lifted me off the stairs, backing me up against the

wall beneath the stairwell, where we were hidden in the shadow from anyone who might come walking in through the bottom entrance. He continued to ravage my mouth and neck, his large hands pulling my coat open and undoing the button and zipper to my pants with deft, demanding movements. He yanked my pants and underwear down my thighs in one swift motion, and while one hand continued to hold me around my waist like a vice, the other slipped in between my legs, thrusting one finger, and then two into the slick cleft waiting for him.

“Jesus!” I moaned, breaking away from his mouth, which he in turn used to nip mercilessly at my earlobe.

“Christ, Red,” he hissed in my ear as he slipped a third finger in to join the other two. “You’re fucking dripping for me down here, baby. You’ve been wanting this as bad as me, haven’t you?”

His proclamation only made me quake further and press my body further against his hand. I was glad he was there to hold me up, because as his fingers continued to drive me further toward the edge of losing my consciousness, I was quickly losing the ability to stand on my own.

“I got you, Skylar,” he purred, pressing with his thumb the sensitive spot just above where his fingers continued their onslaught. “Just let go, baby.”

It didn’t take much more than that before his talented fingers pushed me over the edge and I felt my senses split into a million pieces. His mouth sealed over mine once more, forcing his tongue inside to silence the moans that threatened to echo through the entire stairwell.

Before my mind came back down from where I was floating, he suddenly turned me toward the wall with a quick, brutal motion, yanking my pants the rest of the way down to my ankles. He took his hands away just long enough to unbuckle his pants, and I heard the tell-tale crinkle of a condom wrapper just before I felt the head of his large and very hard cock pushing behind my legs from behind.

He slipped one hand beneath my shirt and up to cup my breast and pinch my nipple through the lace of my bra. I bucked against him at the sensation, moaning at the feeling of his swollen member rubbing against my wet opening. His other hand skimmed down to my hip, tugging my backside into him further so I was pushed out against the cold, rough wall. His fingers went back to massaging my clit, causing the building in my belly to start all over again.

“I’m going to fuck you, Skylar,” he rumbled into my ear. “Do you want to take it? Do you want my cock in you?”

I couldn’t say anything but moan, but I nodded my head. “God, yes,” I managed to croak as his fingers start to move fast on my clit.

Roughly, he spread my legs as far as they could within the confines of the garments still twisted around my ankles. The thick length of him glided easily between my thighs, teasing my throbbing center with the tip until I started to push back to meet him. With one swift strike, he filled me completely. The hand on my breast dropped to my hip as he pulled out and slammed back in. He picked up the pace slightly, thrusting evenly to cause that strange feeling I had only experienced once before—just a few weeks ago—to build inside me.

“Tell me,” he growled in between hoarse breaths as he continued his unforgiving work. The fingers on my clit stroked with a rhythm that matched his hips, and I was finding it increasingly hard to think. “Tell me you want me.”

“Jesus,” I breathed as he slammed into me again. “I do. God, Brandon, I want you so fucking bad.”

He hurtled in and out of me, skin slapping skin with every ferocious movement, the sounds of our bodies meeting echoing up the stairwell of the entire building. The tension in my belly had spread throughout my entire lower body, and I could feel another orgasm approaching with every single thrust, every single pinch.

“I want you to come, Skylar,” Brandon ordered behind. “I want to feel your pussy squeeze every last drop out of my cock.”

Every movement pushed me higher and higher as Brandon rubbed my G-spot with the same tortuous rhythm he was using on my clit.

“Now, Skylar!” he commanded. He pulled out one more time, and with his final, hard thrust, I fell forward against wall, gripping the texture of the hard, condensed pebbles with my fingertips. I moaned into it, having lost all control over my body and my mind. With a loud grunt behind me, Brandon collapsed over my back, his cock throbbing with his release as he shuddered into the bared skin of my neck.

~

When I finally started to return to reality, the hard surface of the concrete wall rubbed uncomfortably against my cheek. I

was standing in a dark stairwell of MIT, where several faculty members of the most prestigious technical institute in the world could plausibly see me with my pants around my ankles.

Well, at least it wasn't an HLS building.

I shifted my body, and Brandon pulled out with a sigh that sounded almost regretful. As gracefully as I could, I squatted down to tug my pants back up, wondering just what I had done. I had promised myself I'd take it slow with him. Considering it wasn't like me to have sex with a man on our first date, it definitely wasn't like me to have sex in a public stairwell. Not to mention lose control like that...*again*. I was starting to rack up quite a few things on the list of out-of-character actions I seemed to do when I was with Brandon.

When I looked up, I found Brandon staring at me, his chest still heaving from his effort, although he had neatly closed his pants and somehow disposed of the condom. In the aftermath of the moment, I found myself noticing all sorts of small details about him I hadn't seen before. He had a tiny scar that notched just right of his left eyebrow, and the few worry lines crisscrossing his brow above eyes that currently glowed the color of the Caribbean. I watched as a drop of sweat made its way down from his hairline down the bridge of a slightly crooked nose. I reached up with a finger and wiped it away before it could drip to the floor, and my touch seemed to break our silent trance.

He blinked, then stamped a brief but thorough kiss on my swollen lips before pushing away from the wall. He looked appreciatively at my position, pants still undone, before he reached down to help me button up my jeans.

“Don’t,” I said sheepishly, batting his hands away so I could fix them faster than he could. After what he had just done to me, I could handle redressing myself.

“I, ah...” he began, trailing off as he ran a sheepish hand through his mussed hair. I reached out and smoothed some of it down around his ear, and was rewarded with a heart-meltingly smile as he grabbed my hand and kissed it briefly.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” he said against my palm before releasing it.

“I wasn’t either,” I murmured, my face turning red as I recalled again what we had just done.

But if he thought less of me, he showed no signs of it as he pulled me roughly to him and nuzzled into my neck.

“You seem to bring things out in me...” he murmured. “I don’t know. This was very...out of the ordinary.”

I blew a long, relieved breath out as I welcomed his touch. “I’m glad I’m not the only one.”

He stood up and smiled as he smoothed his hair back a bit more, then reached out and tucked a few of my wayward strands back into place behind my ears.

“Come on, Red, let’s get out of this dungeon,” he said gruffly as he tugged his scarf back into place. “I’m starving, and I’m thinking pizza and some decent beer are in order.”

~

Chapter 21

I hoped that whatever demons Brandon had been struggling with after introducing me to his foster father would be vanquished a mostly silent walk to the T at Kendall Square. After informing David that we were going to take the train to the North End, Brandon had spent the remainder of the ten-minute walk holding my hand and brooding silently, not even stopping to point out any of the other buildings where he had likely spent most of his time during those formative years of his life. Instead, he strode quickly and efficiently past the darkened campus, forcing me at time to jog just to keep up.

By the time we descended into the brightly lit T station, I was relieved by the general din of public transportation.

“Did you remember your tokens?” I asked, batting my eyes profusely as we approached the turnstiles where we could swipe our Charlie cards.

“Very funny,” he said, but surprised me as he whipped out a card for himself. He waved it in front of my face before swiping himself through. “First thing I did after I got back to Boston.”

“Because you take the T *all* the time, right?” I said as I stepped through.

“Apparently now I do,” he said with a grin. He reached out and took my hand again as we walked to the downtown track.

“I have some hand sanitizer if you need it,” I whispered when his nose wrinkled when we passed a corner that smelled

distinctly of urine. “You know, if you can handle hanging with us *hoi polloi*.”

Brandon rolled his eyes. “You act like I was raised with a damn silver spoon. I’ll let you know if I need some help.”

He released my hand and slid an arm around my waist companionably, just before he reached a little lower to pinch my backside. My squawks were apparently better than he expected, since he laughed out loud at my reaction. The sounds of our horseplay echoed through the tall chamber. I closed my eyes and reveled in the sound for the brief seconds until they subsided into the general hum of the station.

“So are you doing this for me?” I asked as we stood apart from a few other people waiting for inbound Red Line to approach. “I mean, you pay for that fancy car of yours. You don’t need to take shitty public transit—and it’s well known that this line is particularly shitty—just for me.”

“Would you take it with me?”

I raised an eyebrow. “All the time? Probably not.” Something about that still made me feel uncomfortable.

Brandon turned leaned his head from side to side, as if weighing the option. “So, abandon my date just so I can stay in my posh, clean car while she takes the train with everyone else, or stay with her like a decent human being. Gee, tough decision. Are you trying to make me strike out with you completely, Red?”

I rolled my eyes and nudged his shoulder with mine. “Of course not. I just feel bad. You don’t have to be someone you’re not any more than I do.”

Brandon shrugged, but didn't quite meet my gaze. "Don't you sometimes just want to forget who you are anyway?" he asked quietly. "I told you, sometimes about you makes me feel like regular Brandon again, instead of 'Mr. Sterling.' Who knows, maybe it is the fact that you drag me onto the train." He glanced at me with a queer smile. "I kind of like it."

He winked, and stepped toward the edge of the platform to look for a sign of an approaching train. I wisely didn't pursue this line of thought again. I didn't know whether his comment meant that I was good in his life or bad—did I want to be thought of as a distraction?—but I didn't want to spoil his good mood while it was making a comeback.

~

"Well, you're never going to convince me that was better than New York pizza, but it was pretty good," I said as I tugged my gloves back on.

We strolled out of Alberto's Pizzeria, a tiny hole-in-the-wall place deep down one of the windy North End streets the tourists can't find. The small bell rang behind us as we stepped out into the cold.

"You're a dirty liar, Red. That's the best pizza outside of Italy," Brandon said as he patted his still-flat belly. He had put down at least half a pie by himself. I didn't know how he did it; I had eaten two pieces, and I felt completely stuffed.

"Am not," I insisted.

"Are too. Did you hear those guys speaking Italian? It's the real deal here. I think the owner is actually from Naples. Nobody in the New York's Little Italy is like that anymore."

I shrugged. I couldn't argue with him there. Everyone from New York knew that the real Little Italy was in the Bronx anyway. "Doesn't matter. You don't have to be Italian make great pizza. Every New Yorker knows that."

Brandon scoffed and shook his head, but still slung a heavy arm over my shoulder and steered us back toward the more pedestrian-heavy scene on Hanover. Even though it was still the middle of winter, the cobblestoned street was full of people waiting to eat at the various *trattorias* and *pasticcerias* that lined the uneven sidewalks.

Brandon walked us into one shop that was particularly crowded, enough that condensation fogged up the storefront windows. Releasing my frame, he easily elbowed his way to the front of the counter using his linebacker-sized shoulders, then reached behind and pulled me in front of him, wrapping his arms securely around my waist and resting his chin on my shoulder.

He didn't ever seem to want to stop touching me, I realized with pleasure. All through dinner, which we had eaten on stools at a Formica-covered countertop, he had rested one hand comfortably on my knee; on the train, he'd balanced his arm along the back of my seat so his fingers could toy with my hair while we chatted. Now, with his fingers knotted comfortably about my waist, I thought I could hear him humming contentedly as we perused the pastry-stuffed display. I didn't fight it. I wanted to hum right along with him.

"You ever been here before?" he said directly into my ear so he could be heard over the din. Various shop employees scurried behind the counter, taking orders from customers at

such a dizzying pace I felt like I was back on Wall Street, watching the traders on the floor.

I twisted around to grin at him. “Mike’s? Of course. Best cannoli in the city. Not as good as back home, but, still delicious.”

Brandon grinned back, his dimples showing in a way that made my stomach flip despite its full contents.

“We’ll see. Two ricotta cannoli, a coffee and a tea, please,” he called to one of the servers, and released my waist to reach into his coat pocket for his wallet.

“No, let me,” I protested, yanking my wallet from my purse as quickly as I could. “You got dinner and the T.”

“Absolutely not,” Brandon said, taking out a twenty. Obviously he couldn’t completely get rid of his need to impress. I understood more now about why he was that way, but it didn’t convince me to put away my wallet. I didn’t care what most romance novels said I should expect from chivalry; I didn’t like feeling beholden to anyone.

“Nope,” I said, plucking the twenty from his hand and shoving it into Brandon’s pocket.

Before he could object, I handing a ten to the bored teenage server, who scurried away to make change and retrieve our desserts. I twisted around to find a pair of bright blue eyes glowering at me.

“Come on, Red. I thought I was taking you out,” he grumbled down at me, trying not to make a scene in the middle the café.

I raised an eyebrow at him playfully and touched him on the nose with my index finger. “You’re pretty cute for an Eisenhower-era chauvinist, did you know that?”

The small crease between his eyebrows deepened, but he couldn’t hide the obvious amusement cracking his fierce expression. “I guess I’ll have to be faster than you, then. You’re going to keep this old man young; I can see that.”

I grinned and turned back toward the counter, grabbing the cannoli and my tea from the server with a quick thanks before Brandon could take them.

“Let’s walk and eat, old man,” I called to him, wanting to get out of the congested shop. I wove around the throngs of people, and was out the door before I turned around to check for my date. Brandon’s blue eyes glowed through the crowd, clearly up for the chase as he followed me out.

~

“Favorite movie.”

It was a common game that had emerged spontaneously as we meandered around the North End and down toward the Harbor, enjoying our cannoli and coffee as we zigged through the crooked streets of one of the oldest parts of Boston. So far I had discovered that Brandon’s favorite drink was a craft IPA (although he also enjoyed good scotch or brandy), his favorite band was Alice in Chains, and his favorite color was red. From his obvious leer during the last answer, I had to wonder about the truth of the last one. I, in turn, had informed him of my love of excellent Irish whiskey, my longtime love affair with Bill Evans, and that, like every other stereotypical New Yorker, I favored black.

I gave him a playful side-eyed look. “What do you think, boss man?”

He wrinkled his nose in an expression so adorable that I wanted to kiss him. “Please tell me it’s not that movie about the blonde chick at Harvard,” he said.

“Well, I’m not a complete cliché,” I said. “No, although that *Legally Blonde* is objectively hilarious. Don’t even try to argue the point. You’ll lose. Guess again.”

Brandon pursed his lips because venturing another guess. “I got it. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Since you’re from Brooklyn and all.”

“Isn’t that sort of akin to me guessing *Good Will Hunting* since you’re also a prodigy out of Southie?”

He smirked, but didn’t deny my sarcastic compliment. “Dorchester. Totally different places, but I take your point. Okay, then, Ms. Unpredictable, answer the question.”

I gave him my best wide-eyed gaze. “*To Kill a Mockingbird*.”

He grinned. “You’re kidding. Really? How is that less clichéd than *Legally Blonde*?”

“Because *Mockingbird* is a legitimate classic,” I said. “Come on, what lawyer wasn’t partly inspired by Atticus Finch?”

“Hmm. Okay, I’ll give you that. So you like old movies then?”

I nodded after finishing my cannoli. “I grew up in a house that appreciated fine arts and cinema,” I said through a

mouthful of ricotta and pastry shell, which I washed down with the last bit of my tea. “Plus our TV reception was terrible, so all we ever watched were Bubbe’s old VHS tapes. Gary Cooper’s a fox.”

“Figures,” Brandon said. “You are definitely a save-the-world type. I think you just earned yourself another nickname, Scout.”

I blanched. “Another nickname?”

“Well, we could go with Boo Radley, if you want, but I figured you’d prefer the narrator.”

“All right, all right, your turn,” I said as I shoved against his shoulder. “Favorite movie.”

“You’re not gonna guess?”

I didn’t respond, just gave him a look that hopefully told him he better answer or I’d push him into the harbor. He popped the last of his cannoli into his mouth and took an agonizingly long time to chew and swallow. He opened his lips as if he were going to answer, and then lifted his coffee cup instead.

“Oh my God!” I cried, tossing my now-empty cup at him. He laughed as it clattered onto the pavement, then scooped it up and tossed it a nearby trashcan along with his trash.

“You are way too much fun to rile up, Red,” he chuckled, grabbing my hand and tucking me comfortably under his shoulder with my arm wrapped about his waist. The wool of his coat shielded me from the breeze coming off the harbor. I eagerly burrowed into the space, inhaling the Brandon’s scent with something close to ecstasy.

“It’s *Goodfellas*, by the way,” he was saying. “I’m a sucker for Scorsese. I almost guessed that for you too, actually, since it also takes place in Brooklyn.”

“East Brooklyn,” I corrected him almost automatically, like everyone else who lived in the borough. “Yeah, it’s a good movie.”

I didn’t want to tell him that Scorsese’s film was a little too close to home to be enjoyable, considering my dad’s involvement with people who had actually worked for the real-life versions of those guys. There had been a few too many instances of mobsters or their henchmen sporadically showing up at our front door while I was little. There was nothing endearing or glamorous about them.

We walked for a bit in comfortable silence. Usually when a lull in conversation hit, I was left wondering whether or not my date was bored or what he might be thinking—it was often the first thing that turned me off. But with Brandon, it didn’t seem to matter if we were talking or not. The simple rub of his hand on my shoulder and the way he occasionally rested his nose in my hair made me feel at ease without a single word. Why he felt like he had to shower me with extravagant gifts was beyond me. His company was the best thing he could offer.

“Sometimes it’s hard to believe that so many legendary things happened here,” I remarked as we passed some signage marking the Paul Revere Trail. A group of tourists posed for pictures beside it, and Brandon nodded at them pleasantly, though his arm around my shoulder tightened.

“Well, that’s Boston for you,” he said, tugging me even closer. “Greatest city in the world.”

I snorted. “I think that’s my line.”

He looked down at me with a grin, then stopped walking. “Hold on a second.”

Before I could stop him, he swiped a bit of stray ricotta from my cheek before sucking it off his finger. I stared at him, half disgusted, half aroused.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” I said, in response to which I received a toothy grin.

“Oh, believe me, Red, there are a lot of things I wouldn’t mind licking off you,” Brandon said as he hugged me closer to his side. He nuzzled his mouth against my ear, nipping my earlobe in a way that sent shivers down my spine. “I think you taste best of all, though.”

The flush that ran up my neck was immediate, as was the sudden bolt of desire between my legs. I swallowed it down and reminded myself that we were both in public and in the freezing cold.

“Well, fair’s fair, Mr. Sterling,” I said as nonchalantly as I could manage. I turned to face him, letting his hand drift down my arm so I could toy with his fingers. “I should probably get a taste of you sometime soon too, don’t you think?”

One side of his face quirked up into that sly half-smile. He leaned in again so I could feel his warm breath against neck and growled into my ear, “Anytime, Red. Any. Time.”

It was becoming entirely too clear that I wasn’t going to be able to play this game very well with him. He would fluster

me every single time. So instead, I took the coward's way out and changed the subject.

“So we went to MIT, and now to your favorite places to eat,” I said, looking to where several boats and a few barges made their way across the dark harbor. “What are your other favorite places in Boston?”

“Well, if it were April, I'd be taking you to Fenway, of course,” Brandon said with a sigh. We resumed our companionable stride despite our difference in height. Considering how much walking we were doing, I was glad that I had worn low-heeled boots.

“Ugh, don't tell me you're a member of Red Sox Nation,” I said with a playful scowl. “Those fools clog up the damn T every time there's a home game. You can't get anywhere in this city during baseball season!”

“That just tells me you've never been to Fenway. Anyone who sees the Sox play there knows the magic, baby.”

“Well, I've been to Yankee Stadium a few times,” I countered. “I'm pretty sure that's just as magical.”

He leaned back, feigning with one hand as if I'd just shot him in the heart. “Don't tell me you're a Yankees fan, Red. That might be the end for us.”

I giggled. “No, nothing so bad as that. My dad's actually a Mets fan, if that helps.”

He nodded in approval. “So long as no one wears a Yankees cap, we're good.”

We continued to meander around Old Boston, walking by Faneuil Hall and back up to the cobbled streets of Haymarket

as we chatted amiably about our lives, retelling small stories from our experiences at school and the different careers we had. Brandon was curious when I told him about my decision to leave investment banking for a career in family law—our career choices were actually quite similar.

“Why didn’t you ever leave Boston to play the market in New York?” I wondered.

“Boston’s my home,” Brandon says as he kicked a can out of our way.

“Do you ever go back to your old neighborhood?”

He pressed his lips together, but shook his head. “Not—not really. Sometimes I might check on some old friends of my mother’s, the ones who used to look in on me before I lived with the Petersens.”

He said it so casually that I might have missed the oblique reference to his unfortunate upbringing. Like most people who had had a shitty early life, he tended to talk around the hard facts of his childhood rather than recall them directly. I didn’t want to push him to say more than he wanted—I understood the desire to keep some things firmly in the past—but I also didn’t want to hide the fact that I knew certain things he thought I didn’t.

“But honestly,” he continued without noticing my tension as we crossed the street, “most people I knew back then don’t even live there anymore, and the ones that still do don’t want to see me.”

I frowned. “Why’s that?”

“Probably because they think I should have come back when my ma got out of jail.”

Wait. That was completely different from what I’d been told. “What? I thought she was—”

“Was what?”

I gulped. Shit, I’d been caught. “Um, well, Kieran might have mentioned a few things to me. About your parents.”

His feet came to a sudden halt, stopping us in front of King’s Chapel, its famous cemetery eerily dark and silent in the heart of the city. “Kieran.”

“She’s your friend, right? She was there the night you and I met. Well, she’s the director of—”

“FLS. Yeah, I know.”

He didn’t move, standing as still and tall as the Corinthian columns holding up the front of the church. His arm around my shoulders felt like vice. I continued speaking in a rush, hoping to diffuse the sudden awkwardness that had sprouted between us.

“Kieran just said that you grew up together, that’s all. In the same house and that you were friends. And that your Mom is—”

“Dead.” The word fell between us like a stone.

“Um, yes,” I confirmed with a shaky nod. “And she mentioned that your dad—”

“Is finishing up his second ten-year sentence.” His arm fell from my shoulders and he shoved both of his hands deep into

his coat pockets. When he looked at me, his expression was steel. “For beating up his last girlfriend with a wrench.”

I said nothing, but my stomach dropped at his icy words.

“Oh, she didn’t tell you that part?”

“Brandon, I’m sorry. Kieran just—”

“Has a way of butting in where she shouldn’t.” He pressed his lips together so hard that they nearly disappeared, then exhaled a long breath toward the sky. “What else did she say?”

“Um, well, she also said that your mom was a—had some issues with drugs.”

He pulled his hands out of his pockets and threaded them through his hair, something I now recognized as a sign of agitation. “Anything else?”

I shook my head. “No, not really.”

He darted a suspicious blue glance at me. “You sure?”

“Brandon, yes, I’m sure.” I took a step toward him, hoping he might pull me back into the nook between his arm and his solid body. But instead he took another step back and sighed again.

“Well, I guess it’s for the best,” he said, his tone resigned. “You should know what I really come from.”

We stared at each other for what seemed like a full minute, and it felt like the busy downtown street where we stood was completely silent. His eyes were hooded yet direct; and I begged him to see openness in mine. I wanted to hear whatever he could tell me. I hadn’t been lying when I said that. So I waited.

“She is dead,” he finally said again. “A year after she was released. I was fifteen. She wanted to regain guardianship, but the judge asked me to make a statement about what I wanted.” He shrugged, as if testifying against his own mother weren’t a massive deal. Only the rising accent indicated otherwise. “Life with the Petersens was good. I was about to graduate high school, and they had already offered to send me to MIT if I could get in. I had enough to eat, and no one was coming home drunk or beating the shit out of me on a daily basis.”

I didn’t say anything, but couldn’t help but wince at his harsh words. I couldn’t imagine someone as tall and strong as Brandon being beaten by anyone. A vision of one of the kids from the clinic immediately rose to mind. Angie Martinez and her daughter both came in last Friday with bruises all over their arms; the little girl had a nasty cut over her right eye.

Suddenly I was choked up, imagining Brandon as a small, blonde-haired little boy, with the same kind of bruises up and down him. Brandon didn’t notice, just turned and started to walk quickly across the street toward the park without checking to make sure I was with him. I had to trot to keep up with him, but I was there while he strode the last three blocks past the Granary Cemetery and the Park Street Church. It wasn’t until we were well inside the Commons, walking in the relative peace of the bare-branched trees and the small lights that lines the pathways, that he finally slowed down to finish his story.

“So I chose Ray and Susan,” he said, quietly enough that I had to strain to hear him. “Two days after the judge named maintained their guardianship, she was dead. Drug overdose.”

“Oh, God,” I breathed out, more to myself than to him. A few tears welled up and fell down my cheeks before I could stop them. “Oh God, Brandon.”

As if finally realizing that I was still there, Brandon stopped and turned to look at me in surprise. He lifted both hands to cradle my face and forced me to look up into his fathomless blue eyes while he wiped away the remnants of my tears with his thumbs.

“Skylar, listen to me,” he said, in a calm tone, his slight Boston accent the only remaining sign of his distress. I wondered how his voice could be so even after telling me all of that. “Are you listening?”

I could barely speak, so I just nodded. He sighed.

“I know what it sounds like. Math kid from Southie, deadbeat parents, in and out of foster care. Rescued by an MIT professor. I sound like that damn movie, just fast-forwarded a few years.” He gave me a crooked smile and rolled his eyes. “I even got a Skylar, don’t I? But baby, I dealt with all of this shit a long time ago, and honestly, I got it pretty good in the end.”

“But Ray—” I started to protest, thinking of that oddly cold man in his office piled with papers. The man who was clearly more concerned with a paper full of equations than the man he’d help raise.

“Ray was fine,” Brand cut me off gently. “He gave me the chance to make something of myself, and I took it. Some people in the old neighborhood, they couldn’t handle that. So I just said fuck ‘em, and I don’t waste my time there anymore.” He breathed out, a slow steady breath as he released my face. “I’m okay, Skylar, really. Do you remember what I said?”

I screwed my forehead up, momentarily confused. It couldn't be as simple as that, not after what had happened with his mother. Brandon clearly had issues he hadn't dealt with properly. But before I could say anything, he pressed his forehead to mine and hummed as we breathed in each other's scents.

"I don't need to be fixed, Skylar," he reminded me softly. "Please understand that."

I didn't. I was screwed up enough from my relationship with my mother; I couldn't imagine anyone could be truly okay after all of the hardship he'd endured as a kid, even if it was more than twenty years ago now. Could a person ever really get over being betrayed by a parent? I wasn't so sure.

But I nodded my head anyway to show him that I had at least heard what he said. I could see his deep desire to please others, as well the guilt from his decisions in his own self-interest. These things now pushed him to go so over the top trying to make others happy. Well, at least the others he cared about. The thought brought an unexpected smile to my lips, and Brandon cocked his head in question.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

I stood up on my tiptoes and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "I just realized something. You like me, Brandon Sterling. You like me a lot."

His mouth quirked up in another crooked smile, and his eyes shined brightly with pleasure.

"Well, I'm glad that's finally getting through," he murmured. He leaned down and pressed his lips onto mine,

grasping me in a soft, sweet kiss that, while lacking the frenzy of our other encounters, was just as potent. When he pulled back, he kept his nose against mine.

I wanted to kiss him again, but he straightened up and tugged me down a path that led across a wide expanse of grass. I looked across the street, and realized that we had walked all the way from the North End through most of the Commons. I had been so engrossed with his stories that I hadn't even noticed where we were.

“Will you come in?” he said, gesturing at the familiar gray stone house where I had already spent one memorable night. “There’s one more thing I’d like to show you.”

The look of boyish hope on his face made it clear that there was no ulterior motive behind the request. Even if there were, my answer probably would have been the same.

“Lead on, sir,” I said, and held out my hand.

~

Chapter 22

We were met by a stark gust of warm, inviting air when we stepped through the large double doors of Brandon's house, a stark contrast to the increasingly frigid air we'd been walking around in for the past few hours. Right down to the time (it was nearing midnight), it looked exactly the same as I remembered: the same impeccably clean surfaces, the same plush carpeting and glossy floors, the same warm lighting and crackling fireplace.

"You have a fetish for fireplaces, don't you?" I asked as Brandon helped me remove my coat and draped it on a rack next to the door. "Your office and here. They're always lit."

He shrugged. "I was cold a lot as a kid," he replied as if it was just a personal preference.

Oh. Another image of a small, shivering blond boy flashed through mind, shivering in the snow outside some dilapidated row house. Shaking the image away, I looked to the familiar warm interior of his living room.

"So does it always look like this when you come home?"

He glanced around. "Like what?"

I followed his glance and gestured at the inviting living room, with its lively fire and the couch piled with plush throw blankets. I wanted to jump into them, preferably with Brandon. Maybe naked. Hmm...

"Oh, just waiting for you to curl up with hot chocolate in the window and watch the snow fall. You know, like it's waiting for you to live here."

“I do live here.” He chuckled. “I guess so. I don’t do a lot of curling up in window sills.” He peered up and down his large frame, and then back to me with a smirk. “Maybe I redo the windows with extra-large bays so I can experience the pleasure.”

“Maybe you should,” I joked.

“But really,” he said, “this place can feel like a tomb when everything is shut down. So I pay Ana well to keep it alight, so to speak.”

He surveyed his living room, checking that all his things were in their proper places, plush and inviting should he actually decide to spend some time with them. Who’d have thought that big Brandon Sterling was afraid of the dark? Again, I had to shake the small, chilled child. As much as I enjoyed—mostly—his proclamations in the stairwell, I didn’t want him to feel like he always had to have sex to ward off pity. More than that, I didn’t want him to think I pitied him at all.

Brandon pulled my gloves off for me and set them on the small console by the door. Then he took one of my hands in his and brought it to his lips with a shy smile.

“I’m glad you’re here, Red,” he said softly, and pulled me close to him. “You look good in my house.”

I blushed, thankful for the dim lighting. “Do I?”

He leaned over and smacked a big kiss on my lips. “Definitely. That was the first thing I thought when I walked in and found you sitting on my windowsill like you owned the place. It wasn’t just that this unbelievably beautiful woman

had magically appeared in my living room. I just remember feeling like it was Deja vu—like you were always supposed to be there. I thought, it’s crazy, I don’t even know this girl, but I don’t want her to leave.”

His words made my response catch in my throat. Then I thought of something.

“Wait. Were you really unable to get me a car that night?”

Brandon grinned sheepishly. “Of course not. But it was the best excuse I could come up with to get you to stay.”

How did he manage to disarm me like this with just a few phrases? His vulnerability was both contagious and intoxicating. We stood there a moment, our arms wrapped tightly about each other, until he gave me a quick, tight embrace and released me, breaking the brief spell.

“Come on, Red. There’s something else I want to show you.”

Somewhat woeful to abandon the promise of the warm living room, I followed him up three flights of stairs, peeking around briefly at each landing as he gave me a brief tour. This place was even more enormous than I thought. The second floor, where I had stayed, boasted two other guest rooms with en suite bathrooms. I caught a glimpse of what looked to be his enormous bedroom on the third floor, along with two other doors. One opened into a lot of bookshelves—probably an equally enormous office—and through the other I caught the workings of a home gym. Well, that explained his physique.

The top floor opened up onto a massive loft that appeared to function as a rec room. In one corner was an enormous

entertainment system in front of the biggest sectional couch I had ever seen. Behind that was a large wet bar stocked with a variety of glassware hanging from dark wooden racks, framed by a variety of neon beer signs for PBR and Guinness, among others. In the middle of the room was a polished pool table, and on the other side of that was a ping-pong table. It was the ultimate bachelor space, although something about the room made it look like it hadn't been used in a while.

“Did you want to watch a movie or something?” I asked.

I wasn't sure why a rec room was so important to show me, but I'd heard worse excuses to get a girl to stick around. I just hoped that Brandon didn't really think he had to use lines like that to get me to stay the night with him. Maybe this was just his way of telling me that he didn't really like craft beer as much as he claimed.

He flipped his gaze over the room briefly. “Oh, no, although we can if you want. This is mostly shit I set up for friends. I—ah—don't really come up here that much.”

The way his voice shifted ever so slightly on the word “friends” made me wonder if he was talking about his friends from the old neighborhood. Right down to the neon Sam Adams sign hanging from the wall over the wet bar and the row of vintage video games lined neatly behind the ping pong table, the room was pretty much designed as college kid's ultimate hang out. It was the kind of place I could imagine any twenty-one-year-old putting together for his friends to come over and watch the game. Except, I thought, Brandon was thirty-seven.

“Do you still talk to your friends from Dorchester?” I asked him.

He glanced back at me sharply. “No. I told you, I don’t really go down there anymore.”

“Yeah, but that’s because you said the people you want to see left. Do you ever see them, now that you don’t live there either? This looks like the kind of place they’d like.”

“Why, because they’re just blue-collar? Because they’re from the bad side of town?”

I frowned. “What? No! I wasn’t implying that at all! I just meant this looks like a guys’ hangout spot, what with the beer and the pool and the games and stuff.”

His shoulders relaxed, and the dark look that had flashed through his eyes just a moment before dissipated. “Fuck. I’m sorry, Red. I just...no, I don’t really see them. It’s a sensitive subject.”

“Yeah, I see that.”

He rubbed his fingers through his hair and grimaced. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “This isn’t what I wanted to show you anyway. Come on.”

Before I could ask him more, Brandon tugged me across the room toward a spiral staircase behind the pool table. At first I resisted the urge to pinch his perfectly shaped ass as he climbed the stairs ahead of me, but upon second thought, I decided he would do the same thing to me, so I reached up and made a nice grab.

He hopped in surprise, but delivered me a mischievous grin in response. “Like what you see, Ms. Crosby?”

I batted my eyelashes at him. “I don’t know what you mean. It was just there, asking for it. What do they say to women? That we really shouldn’t wear such revealing clothes, or else we’re asking for it?”

He looked down at his jeans, which were the opposite of revealing, and waggled his eyebrows in a way that made me burst out laughing. “You better watch out, Red. I give as good as I get.”

“Promise?” I asked as I chased him up the rest of the stairs.

He opened the door at the top into a small room that was completely constructed of glass. At the far side was a small door that led out onto a deck covering the entire roof of the townhouse. I gawked at the view of the Commons visible just over the ledge, but also at the beautiful garden set up around the various amenities. Most of the potted plants were either empty or covered with plastic to protect against the Boston winter weather, but that didn’t detract from the outdoor lounge area, the covered barbecue area, or the cedar-planked hot tub built directly into the roof.

I turned to him. “Is this an excuse to go skinny dipping?” I asked with a nod toward the hot tub. “Because I’m not gonna lie. I’m a sucker for jets.”

Another crooked smile melted my insides.

“I’ll remember that,” Brandon said. “Maybe after I show you what’s in here.”

I turned around observe the room I was actually in as Brandon leaned down to turn on the space heater in the corner.

Unlike the rest of his pristine house, this room was somewhat of a mess. Long wood worktables bordered two of the glass walls, and were partially lined with perforated plywood from which hung various tools—those that weren't scattered over the tabletops, anyway. Various other small, half-built contraptions littered the tables as well, while a few larger power tools and other unidentifiable equipment took up the rest of the space in the small area.

I leaned down to inspect one small contraption that had several multi-colored wires sticking out from it.

“This reminds me of one of those cars we had to build in my high school Physics class,” I said.

“This is my lab,” Brandon said. “It’s where I tinker around with various ideas I have.”

I stood up. “You’re an inventor too? Like Thomas Edison, huh?”

It was hard to tell on his tanned features, but I think he blushed at the comparison.

“Ah, not quite,” he said. “But I like to mess around with things.”

He leaned around me to pick up the contraption I was looking at, and touched the wires gingerly. “This one works with sonar technology to monitor heat waves in a baby’s bedroom. I’m trying to get it to identify the living being in the crib and monitor its temperature and possibly other vitals. You know, for SIDS and stuff like that. I think one day if I can get the right prototype together, I could probably produce it for a mass market.”

I set the project down and turned to him with my arms crossed.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, counselor, but this looks a lot like engineering. Electrical engineering, to be precise.”

He folded his arms across his chest, mirroring my posture, and pressed his lips together as if to say, “Yeah, so what?”

“I thought you didn’t like engineering,” I said.

“I never said that. If you recall, I said they did a lot of cool stuff.”

“You said you didn’t want to waste your life, and I quote, ‘fiddling with wires’,” I retorted. I picked up the small device and held it up. “These look like wires to me.”

He stared at the device until I put it down again, then continued to stare at me, like we were playing some demented game of owl. The guy gave me a run for my money in the stubbornness department, that was the truth.

Finally, his poker face cracked a smile, and he sighed. “I was fifteen,” he said. “And like most fifteen-year-old boys, a complete idiot. Can I show you the rest?”

“There’s more?”

I was speechless as he moved the next few contraptions and proceeded to give me several other multi-million dollar ideas, one after another. When he was finished, he looked sheepishly to where I stood next to him, completely dumbfounded by this man’s brilliance. I mean, knowing someone graduated at age eighteen from MIT and seeing the actual products of their genius are two different things.

“Brandon,” I said slowly. I reached out to touch the edge of the last semi-prototype, some kind of sonar device that might one day regulate sea life populations. “Why don’t you just fund a lab? From what you said, you have the money to hire a whole bunch of engineers to put these ideas into motion, don’t you?”

He looked around and shrugged. “It’s just a hobby. And...I don’t know...I guess I like to know that I did it all myself. Without extra help from money or other people or connections. Business is business. This is more where I get some peace of mind, you know?”

“Has your foster dad—I mean, Ray—seen this? It looks like something he’d probably like.”

He shook his head. “No, he doesn’t really have the time.”

“Oh,” I said, looking around at the multiple experiments in progress. He was like a mad scientist, only minus the crazy and the puffy gray hair and plus a whole lot of gorgeous. Plus a major lawyer. Plus a shark on the market. How many other personalities was Brandon Sterling hiding? “This must impress a lot of people.”

“I’ve never brought anyone up here before,” he murmured, suddenly very interesting in picking at a few wires on one of the works in progress.

I watched him, unsure of what to say. I knew this was his way of introducing me further into his world, but I didn’t realize just how far he wanted to take me. In one evening he’d brought me to meet the man who raised him, and with whom he obviously had a difficult and contentious relationship, had told me uncountable fragments about his life and hobbies, and

then opened the recesses of his heart in showing me his workshop. More than any of the other places I had seen tonight, this place, with its awkward, messy, and utterly brilliant labors of love, was Brandon.

“Ah, so I have a question for you,” he said, toying with wires between his hands and interrupting my train of thought.

“What’s that?” I asked, trying to put him at ease.

“What we did...ah...earlier tonight...”

I flushed. It was obvious he wasn’t talking about eating pizza.

“You, ah, liked it, didn’t you?”

Now I was positive that the color of my face probably matched my hair. I bit my lower lip, but he looked up to hold my gaze.

“I...yes,” I mumbled. “I did.”

“That’s what I thought.” His gaze, at first nervous, softened visibly, and he smiled. “You don’t need to be shy about it. I just wanted to make sure. Some girls say they want to just be taken like that because they think it’s going to be some kind of Fifty Shades shit, one light slap on the ass and they’re coming five times in a row. But really, they just want hearts and flowers and that’s about it.”

Hearts and flowers. That definitely wasn’t me, at least not all the time. And while our interlude in the stairwell was many things, romantic wasn’t one of them. Not most women’s ideal for the first time they had sex with their new lover, but I wasn’t regretting anything. And I hoped I wouldn’t.

The truth was, I wasn't really sure what I liked. No matter what I told the guy, or how great one particular style of sex was, after a while it started to feel one-sided. Sweet or rough, in the bed or on the floor, after all while the actions started to feel routine—the same sort of touches every single time. My mind would start to become easily distracted, wandering around the room while my partner finished his business. Most men seemed to think that the sex part was enough, but I needed more to make it good. The problem was, I wasn't sure what that kind of engagement should look like past the first, exciting stage when everything is new.

“Do you...do you always need it to be...like that?” I asked quietly. I didn't know the right words to describe what we'd done. Rough? A little, maybe. Public? Very. Raw. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear the answer. If it was yes, I already knew how this would end.

Brandon frowned. “I thought you said you liked it.”

“I...I did. I do,” I said, tracing my finger on the rough edge of the wooden table next to me. “But I think I might like it a lot of ways. I just know I don't always want it to be like that.”

He frowned, confused. “Okay, then how do you like it?”

This conversation was beyond mortifying, but I persevered, trying to ignore the heat rising to my face and the likelihood that I looked like a giant tomato. But, I decided, if he could bare himself the way he'd done for the past several hours, I could tell him the truth about my sexuality.

“I...I don't know,” I admitted weakly.

He sat back thoughtfully against his desk. “What do you mean?” He looked up, a sudden look of panic crossing his handsome features. “Christ, Skylar, you weren’t a virgin, were you?”

His panic made me laugh hard from my gut.

“Oh, god, no,” I replied, chuckling. “I mean, I don’t have eons of experience or anything, but I’m not a virgin. And I wasn’t before we had sex, either,” I clarified snarkily.

“So, it’s just never been that good?” he asked with a smirk.

I shook my head, and tried to explain it to him. “No, it’s been fine, I suppose. I just...after a while it starts to feel the same. Once the excitement dies away, my mind starts to wander...and I don’t know how to make it stop.” I looked up helplessly. I wasn’t even sure why I felt like that, so it was hard to explain it to someone else. “I’m sorry,” I said. “It doesn’t seem like men have that kind of problem.”

He crossed the small space between us and came to sit next to me on another stool. He took one of my hands in mind and tinkered with it delicately, pressing my fingers straight and touching his fingers into the pads of my palm.

“I read somewhere,” he recalled, “that for men, sex is ninety percent physical and ten percent mental, and for women it’s the other way around.” He shrugged. “I don’t know about that. I’ve always felt like it’s a solid fifty-fifty for me. Okay, okay, maybe seventy-thirty,” he confessed when he caught my bemused expression. “But the point is, it definitely seems like sex is more of a mental game for some people than for others.”

I pondered that. “Yeah, I guess so. I mean, for me it definitely is.”

He nodded. “I can see that. You’re too quick for most.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’ve seen you in mock trial, Red,” he said with a sneaky grin.

I stared at him, confounded. My mock trial was last spring, back when everyone was applying for the Sterling Grove internship. That the name partner of the firm would have dropped in to check out potential interns was beyond unheard of.

“I don’t like to leave hiring to chance,” he said seriously to my unvoiced thoughts. “If anyone of you was going to be kept on as a junior associate, I needed to know you all could actually handle yourselves in court.” He grinned wider, clearly recalling his visit. “You were arguing the plaintiff’s side of a case to overturn Roe V. Wade. I think you made the witness cry during the cross examination.”

The memory of that argument sailed back into the present, and I groaned and smacked my palm against my head. “Oh my God, you saw that? I *hated* that assignment! It went against every single thing I believe in!”

Brandon laughed as he leaned back on his stool to rest one elbow on the table behind us, and reached the hand around to toy with the ridges of my knuckles while he spoke. “I know. After the class, I heard you say just that to one of your classmates. And yet, you had clearly won your case in a Massachusetts courtroom. You were about ten steps ahead of

the defense the entire time, like you know what everyone was going to say before they said it. But when you walked out and it became clear that you had done that—played the game despite what was going on in your own mind—that was when I knew you’d be one of the best litigators I’d ever seen.” He arched a blond brow. “I still think that.”

I stared at him, uncharacteristically without words. He seemed to do that to me a lot. We sat there, examining each other. I was shocked by how much he had figured out about me, how much he seemed to know.

“So I’m thinking that in the bedroom, you probably don’t want to have to work so damn hard,” he continued, his voice falling just a bit lower. His tinkering with my hand became a little bit more suggestive as he wrapped his fingers tightly around my wrist. “I’m guessing you want to be with someone who’s as observant as you are, who doesn’t become predictable. Who can engage you on your level. Because being ten steps ahead of anyone in the bedroom is boring.”

I gaped.

He cocked his head with a smirk. “I’m right, aren’t I? I didn’t really intend for that to be our first time, but you liked what happened tonight because you didn’t have to think about it, didn’t you?”

I thought back to our encounter under the stairs, and the one in my bedroom. I realized it wasn’t just Brandon’s touch that had made me want him so badly—it was his words too, the way he had spoken to me, the way he had controlled my focus.

“Was that just some kind of a game?” I finally managed to whisper.

The best sex I had had with other partners had also been with people willing to play games, but they had all been the same kinds with the same kinds of people. There was only so many times you could be blindfolded and told you were a dirty bitch before it stopped being exciting and started feeling predictably misogynistic. I had thought our interaction to be so honest, so raw. I didn't think I could bear it if I found out he'd planned it all beforehand.

He ran a hand through his hair. “It wasn't premeditated, if that's what you're asking. But it was definitely an interplay of mental connection as much as it was physical, don't you think?”

I looked up to meet his gaze, which was burning at me as he waited for my response. The memory of him shoving my pants down, fucking me with his fingers and shoving me harshly against the cold stone wall. I had barely had a choice in the matter, and that was part of what turned me on so badly. It was also completely unexpected. Suddenly I felt short of breath again as my eyes flickered from his full lips back to his eyes.

“Yes,” I said confidently. “I do.”

~

Chapter 23

We sat there for a moment on the stools, surrounded by the hodgepodge of his tools and inventions. A light snowfall was visible through the glass walls, but all I could see was him.

“So,” he said softly, apparently under the same trance. His eyes suddenly burned brightly with obvious desire.

“So,” I said, just as softly.

It was clear that wires and temperature monitors didn't matter much anymore. We stared, unblinking. All I could think about was that he had already had me against one wall this evening, and now I was more than ready for him to have me on a table where the whole world could watch if they cared to look. The thought of it had me licking my lips. His eyes trained on my mouth like a big cat's on its prey: glowing, two bright blue orbs in the dim light.

Brandon breathed in and out, the rise of his chest the only betrayal of his calm. Slowly, he stood up, his shoulders blocking the shadowy moon shining through the glass walls. I managed not to cower, though it was hard when he loomed from at least a six-inch advantage. With two fingers, he tipped my chin up to look him in the eye.

“Stand up,” he said in a low voice just a few decibels above a whisper. It was a quiet voice, but no less menacing.

Obediently, I slid off the stool and stood before him. His gaze walked up and down my body with an expression that seared my skin beneath my clothes.

“Take off your clothes,” he commanded softly. “Slowly.”

I didn't even have to think about it. Wordlessly, I bent down; he would get an ample view of my cleavage as the wide neck of my blouse fell forward. I unzipped my boots and kicked them away, where they clattered together on the tiled floor. My socks followed, and without breaking our eye contact, I stood back up, trailing my hands up my legs until I could grab the bottom of my shirt and tug it over my head with a dramatic flourish.

When I let it drop, the vibrant blue irises of his eyes had darkened to the color of the night sky. Momentarily, I was struck with doubt. I had never attempted a naughty striptease before. Was I doing this right? I thought I was, but his fierce expression didn't change.

Ignoring the nervous goose bumps rising on the backs of my arms, I offered as coquettish a grin as I could manage and drifted my hands back down to unbutton my pants, peeling them down my legs until they were completely off. When I stood upright again, he had reached a hand up to tug his collar slightly away from his neck. I bit my lip to stifle a smile. Yeah, I was definitely doing this right.

The space heater had turned the room from a chilly glass igloo into a toasty little greenhouse, pleasantly fogging up the windows with the condensation against the cold exterior. Despite the dropping temperatures and snowflakes falling outside, I was quite comfortable standing in front of him in nothing but a black lace bra and matching panties. As I watched him peruse my body, I silently thanked God for my swimming habit and for the presence of mind to wear decent lingerie. I didn't think Brandon had gotten much of a look in the stairwell.

Brandon reached out and traced with his knuckles the elastic edge of my bra, from the pin-thin strap across the delicate skin of my upper breast. He dropped his fingers into the hollow between the lace cups and drifted his fingertips back across the other side. My breath became shallow as he slid a finger under the other strap, worrying it provocatively before letting it snap back into place against my clavicle.

“I like this,” he said, his voice catching noticeably over the words. “A lot. Where did you get it?”

“La-la Perla,” I managed to stutter. He continued to play with my strap, and I bit my lip to prevent myself from grabbing his hand and forcing him to do the same thing with my nipple.

“How does a poor law student afford this kind of lingerie?”

I gulped. It was an indulgence—my only real one, beyond one expensive pair of shoes—that I allowed myself to have from time to time. For whatever reason, I loved knowing that beneath my consignment suits and ten-year-old jeans I was wearing something truly beautiful. It made *me* feel beautiful.

“It’s...my thing,” was all I could barely breathe out. “It makes me feel pretty.”

His eyes flickered back up to my face. “You couldn’t be anything but gorgeous, Skylar,” he said softly, and I swore that both of us could hear the thump of my heart in return. “Has anyone else seen it?”

I looked down at the set and back up again.

“Ah...no,” I answered lamely. Was that good? Bad? It was that irritating moment that always seemed to ruin the mood whenever any guy asked a question with a similar connotation. No man, no matter how enlightened, seemed to want to think of their date as having a sexual history, but they didn’t want her to be ignorant either. It was infuriating.

Brandon interrupted me from my brooding by snapping my bra strap again to my collar bone again—harder.

“Ow!” I cried, my hand flying up to press at the suddenly sore spot.

“You’re thinking too much, Skylar,” he said curtly. “If I didn’t want to know, I wouldn’t ask. And so we’re clear, I couldn’t give a shit if you’ve been with one or one thousand other men, because none of them are going to light a fucking candle to what you and I can do together.”

Well, that was confident.

As if he could read my mind, Brandon gripped my bicep and pulled me tight against him. “You’re damn right I’m confident,” he breathed into my ear. “And with good reason, too.”

There was no escaping his unique scent as he hovered his mouth over the contours of my mouth and cheeks, fluttering his lips over my skin without—quite—making contact. I started to shiver with anticipation, but he dodged every attempt I made to capture his lips with mine. Finally, he released me with a heavy inhale and took a heavy step back. His gaze traveled down my body and up again, burning every place it landed until it reached my face again.

“Skylar,” he said, his voice low and almost menacing. “I said take off your clothes. I meant all of them.”

Something about the way he ordered me to do it made my skin prickle in anticipation. I knew, mind game or not, that I didn’t have a choice here. I had to do whatever he told me. And hell if I wanted otherwise.

Too impatient now to continue my striptease rouse, I quickly unlatched my bra, letting it fall to the ground while my breasts bounced free. I heard a sharp intake of breath, but Brandon kept his eyes zeroed on mine. Without breaking eye contact, I shimmied my panties down my legs and kicked them to join my other clothes.

I knew I wasn’t perfect. My skin, despite its light olive tone, was mostly covered with a smattering of light freckles. While I had a nice flat stomach and decent muscle, I had smallish breasts and enough wiggle to my parts that I wasn’t ever going to be the type to walk around in Daisy Dukes, no matter what my grandmother said. But standing in front of Brandon, I felt brazen, confident, and sexier than ever. His steely blue gaze, which was by this point burning up the entire room with its intensity, made me feel like I was the only person in the world he’d ever seen this way. Like nothing could ever make him to look away from me.

“Sit back on the stool,” he said, his voice still low but menacing. “Spread your legs. We’re going to do this slowly this time.”

When I did so obediently, he nodded in approval. He stood up in front of me, and I tilted my head back, practically begging for his touch, his taste. I remembered what we had

done not long ago, and I wanted it again and so much more. My whole body was practically humming for those deft fingers.

“Skylar,” he said, and I looked up to find his equally hungry gaze. “Show me how you touch yourself.”

I hesitated. I had never done that in front of someone before. At least, not when they were just standing there, staring at me. “Why? You already do it just fine.”

He frowned again. Apparently he really didn’t like being contradicted during foreplay. “Because I said so. Don’t be shy. Let me see.”

Somewhat reluctantly, I closed my eyes and slid my hand down my stomach into the warm thatch of hair between my legs. I started to toy with my clitoris, my fingers finding the familiar rhythm I set for myself in those moments that had become a bit too common of late. *Until now*, I hoped.

“Does it feel good?”

Wordlessly, I nodded, frowning in concentration as I tried to ignore the obvious distractions: the slight occasional chill of the air on my bare skin, the cold steel rim of the stool against my ass, and the fact that Brandon was still fully clothed, watching me pleasure myself.

“What are you thinking about?”

I didn’t say anything, just shook my head, frustrated. Goddammit. It was the same with everyone. This was the reason I never, ever managed to orgasm with a partner, at least until recently. Men always thought it just took a quick tap or two and magically I’d come. It didn’t matter if I tried to

explain it or not—no one ever seemed to key in on the fact that my mind was what controlled my orgasm, not my body, and that it was hard fucking work keeping all the distractions at bay.

And right now, I couldn't. The spell I'd felt just moments before had dissipated; this felt like work, not play.

“Do you need help?”

I opened my eyes to find Brandon standing next to me naked except for his underwear, a pair of skin-tight boxer briefs that did nothing to hide his obvious erection. My fingers sped up involuntarily as I sucked in a deep breath at the sight of him, all six feet, four inches of perfection, even with the pair of small triangular scars just under his right pectoral. God, he was gorgeous. He gently pulled me off my stool and slid behind me, tugging me back between his legs so he could surround me with his warmth and slide his arm between my legs to cover my hand with his.

He slid his tongue up my throat and nipped my ear. “Relax against me. Keep going and just listen to my voice.”

Obediently I leaned my head back onto his shoulder and closed my eyes again, basking in the feel of his stubble cheek drifting over my throat as his fingers moving comfortably with mine over my clitoris.

“Do you remember that first night in your apartment?”

Wordlessly I nodded. How could I forget? No one had ever elicited that kind of response from my body so intensely or efficiently.

“Do you remember how I laid you down? How I tasted you?”

My fingers moved a little faster, applied a little more pressure of their own accord as I easily recalled his mouth between my legs. The hot, warm, slippery wet of it. The delicacy of his tongue feasting on my most sensitive parts. The slipperiness of his fingers, plucking and pulling at my body with the nuanced sensitivity of a musician. He had the touch, that was for sure.

“You tasted so good, Skylar,” he murmured against my neck. He trailed his nose in and out of the shallow lines of my skin, around my ear, which he bit lightly, causing me to moan. “You tasted so fucking sweet. I could have eaten you all damn night, baby, like a goddamn feast.”

I moaned again, this time louder as my hips jerked against our hands as he added his own pressure to my ministrations, broad fingers moving in time with mine.

“Do you want to hear what I really wanted to do to you?” His voice had deepened impossibly further, hypnotizing me with its sensuous baritone.

I melted against his warm body, lost in the rhythm of our hands and the images he was putting in my mind. Unable to do anything but hum in approval.

“I wanted to tear the rest of your clothes off you, Skylar,” he told me as he passed his other hand up my waist and rested it comfortably over my right breast, kneading it softly and causing my nipples to rise erect. “I wanted to run my tongue over every inch of this beautiful fucking body.”

“Mmmm,” I groaned, thrusting my hips against our hands, which were at this point more controlled by his movements than by mine.

The hand on my breast trailed its fingers around the curve and back up to the nipple, which he pinched lightly and tugged, force it to elongate under his precise touch. He pinched it again, the time a little harder, causing me to jerk under his touch.

“You like that, baby?” he murmured. His teeth clenched again around my ear lobe, this time harder to match the pleasurable pain he was dispensing to my nipple. My hips thrust forward in time with the rhythm of his hand. I was so close.

“I wanted to fuck you so hard, Skylar,” he told me, his voice now quaking with desire. I could feel his hard length pushing into my back, which only pushed me closer the edge. “I wanted to spread your legs and shove my cock in you so fucking deep. I wanted to feel every part of you, with nothing in between us—absolutely nothing, baby. I wanted to feel you shake and squeeze every last drop me into you, and then I wanted to feel you come, baby. I wanted to make you come, and come, and come, and come, and come, and come!”

With his last words, which were really more of a command, and a small grunt of his own, Brandon quickly pushed my limp hand aside. He seized the now-throbbing clit firmly between two fingers and squeezed.

“Oh, Jesus CHRIST, BRANDON!” I yelped as every muscle in my body seized. I launched up onto my toes, shoving against his warm body as I lost every ounce of control

I had left. The hand at my breast dropped to anchor my waist to him while the quakes tremored through me.

“That’s it, baby, that’s it,” Brandon purred into my ear as he softened his touch, rubbing out the remainder of my orgasm as I continued to shake in his arms. “Let it come, let it go.”

Stricken in his arms, I quivered for several more seconds until I fell backward, weak and noodle-like. I sighed, dazed and unable to think in my wringed out form. But he wasn’t finished yet.

He stood up, holding up my weight under my elbows while he rotated us around so that I was facing the table with him behind me. He reached forward to push a few of the small contraptions out of the way. Then he ran his hands lightly over my back and pushed me gently down so that I was lying on the hard surface, my face turned to one side as I lay limp with my eyes still closed.

“All right. Now I want you to stop thinking about something I wanted to do. I want you to think about what I’m doing to you right now, Skylar,” his deep voice rumbled against my shoulder as a large hand stroked the length of my back, down over my backside and back up. “Imagine yourself, bent over this table, my cock hard between your legs. You make me so fucking hard, Skylar, I swear to fucking God, I’m going to tear this beautiful body in two.”

I groaned, unable to keep the noise at bay as his words penetrated through my orgasm-soaked daze. Vaguely I registered the brief absence of his skin on mine as I heard the crinkle of a condom wrapper. A second or two later, my body felt the return of his warmth.

“God, you’re so ready for me, baby,” he said, pressing his long length against my drenched sex, rubbing the tip against my entrance until I thought I would literally scream for more. His thumb replaced his member briefly, dipped into me.

His thumb trailed up a few inches to massage my other puckered opening, then taking me by surprise when Brandon started to push it in. “One day I’m going to fuck you here, too,” he said, his voice vibrating against my ear, which he nipped, causing a sharp intake of breath. “That’s a promise, Red. You won’t know when, but one day I’m going to take this ass, right along with every other inch of you.”

He slid his thumb all the way in to his knuckle and I gasped at the foreign fullness while he nudged at my other opening with his other, much larger member.

“Are you ready for me, Red?” he rumbled. “Do you want my cock?”

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Say it,” he said, sliding the tip—but only the tip—into me before tortuously pulling it out again. He continued to work his thumb in and out of my ass, causing me to groan involuntarily against the countertop, both in ecstasy and frustration.

“Ah, Brandon!” I moaned.

“Say it, baby,” he demanded behind me. “Beg me for it.”

I pressed my forehead against the table and braced my hands on the countertop, pushing back against him, trying to force him in. He resisted, but kept up the excruciatingly teasing with his thumb and the tip of his erection. God, I

wanted him so badly. More than I had ever wanted anything. “Please,” I moaned as I pushed back again. “Please, I want your cock.”

“All right, hush now,” Brandon said against my ear as his big body covered me.

He slipped his other hand around my hip to play with my clit, quickly bringing me to the edge yet again while his cock slid in, one excruciatingly slow inch at a time. Spreading my still-sensitive tissues and giving me a few moments to adjust to his considerable size. He wasn’t small, that was for sure. As ready as I was for him, I still needed time to adjust.

“Ah,” he grunted as he was finally able to push in completely. Then he started to move, and started to match his pace in the with maddening penetration of his thumb.

“Do you remember?” he whispered gruffly as he continued to move in slightly faster circles that matched the rhythm of the finger in my ass and the others on my clit. My hips started to move again of their own accord—his accord, since I apparently had no control over any of my reactions to him. I clawed at the table and moaned.

“Do you remember?” he barked again. “What I did to you tonight? How I fucked you hard against that wall, and then made you come apart in my arms? Do you like how I’m taking your pretty little ass with my finger?”

“Ummmm, yessss,” I hissed as he thrust still deeper into me.

“Should I take it now with my cock, Skylar?” The hand on my clit briefly swept around to give my backside a brief slap

and cupped one cheek roughly to leverage himself even deeper. I clawed at the table—for release or escape, I wasn't quite sure. His hand returned to my clit, the other steadily working my ass while he pummeled into me, harder and harder, offering more increasingly dirty suggestions of what he wanted to do to that aforementioned body part. Rather than alarming me, the ideas only turned me on even more, sending me spiraling toward yet another orgasm with every flick and thrust of his fingers.

“Jesus!” I panted as my hands grasped desperately for purchase on the cold surface of the table. “Oh, God, uhhh, Brandon, I'm...so...close!”

He rammed into me even harder, continuing delicious rhythm with his other fingers, claspng my pelvis between them like I was one of his power tools.

“Would you like that, baby?” he asked as he continued his assault, matching his words to his rhythm. “Would you like my cock in your ass? Going...so...deep?”

“AAAAah!” I screamed, his words driving me past my tipping point as my body began to convulse and tighten around him. “I'm...oh, shit, I'm coming!”

“That's it, baby,” he encouraged, even while his voice betrayed a break in his controlled facade. “Fuck, Skylar, FUCK!” he cried, thrusting in one, two, more times before he was forced to remove his hands and collapse heavily on top of me, his face buried into my hair as we both, at last, found our release together.

We laid there, his large body covering my smaller one splayed across his table, for what might have been a few

minutes or an hour. At some point, when the adrenaline coursing through my body finally started to ebb, Brandon sighed.

“I don’t know what gets into me when I’m around you, Red. I’m like a goddamn teenager again, ready to go at it anytime, any place.”

With a brief kiss to the back of my neck, Brandon pushed off me, and turned to dispose of his condom in the small waste bin under one of the tables and wash his hands in the sink in a corner. I turned around so I could admire his fully naked form for the first time. I was right about the home gym. It was obvious that he was a serious athlete from the sinewy muscles that curved around his shoulders, the stacked lines of a six-pack over his trim torso, the perfectly taut form of his ass.

He turned around met my frank stare with a smirk. “See something you like, Red?”

I grinned, but I didn’t stop ogling. “Actually, yeah. You do pretty well in your birthday suit, Mr. Sterling.”

His smirk intensified as he returned to my side and leaned back casually against the counter, making no move to cover himself. He was clearly confident in his body, seemingly unaffected by the fact that he was stark naked in a glass house. I, on the other hand, now coming down from the highs of multiple orgasms, was not quite so blasé about it.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked sharply as I crouched down to retrieve my clothes from the floor.

I stood up, clasp my shirt against the front of my body. “Ah, just getting dressed.”

I could feel the flush up my body, which only intensified with the knowledge that I didn't have my clothes on to hide its spread. Brandon reached out and yanked the shirt out of my hands and tossed it back onto the floor.

“Did you really think I was done with you yet?” he asked as he moved in front of me and, with a quick, graceful movement, caught me by the backs of my legs and lifted me up to straddle his waist. Before I could speak, he captured my mouth with a deep kiss, languidly turning his tongue around mine until I was breathless. I gripped the ends of his hair and yanked. Suddenly the fact that I was completely naked didn't matter so much anymore.

“I told you, Red,” he said as he broke away, equally gasping for breath. “Like a goddamn teenager.” And with that, he turned and carried me out of the workshop and back down the two flights of stairs to his bedroom, where he could continue to command my body yet one more time that night.

~

Chapter 24

I woke up alone the next morning tucked securely into soft, white warmth. What little hours I'd slept had been blissful, considering that Brandon's bedding consisted of a massive down-comforter, multiple down-filled pillows, and the softest cotton sheets I'd ever touched. The bright sun flashed through a row of bay windows next to the bed, through which I could see the snow-covered tree tops flashing gold in the early morning light.

I rolled to my back and stared up at a white, box-beam ceiling while I returned to full consciousness. A sleek silver alarm clock on the nightstand read six-thirty AM. By my count, that meant I had been asleep for barely four hours. Brandon had made it his personal mission to give us both at least two more orgasms before we succumbed to sleep. I was sore, but in the best possible way.

The door to the en suite bathroom opened, and Brandon strode out, fully dressed in a navy suit pants and white-and-blue gingham shirt that made his eyes pop in the morning light. I smiled, and a heart-stopping grin in response. He walked to where I lay and leaned down for a lingering kiss. I was immediately engulfed in his fresh scent. It was something he put in his hair, I realized, that carried that unique almond aroma.

"Morning, beautiful," he said as he stood back up. He walked across the room and entered an enormous walk-in closet that looked about the size of my living room. I sat up, clutching the sheets to my still naked body, and peered through

the doorway to where he was selecting a tie out of drawer full of them.

After he found one he liked, a light blue with a discreet paisley pattern, he walked back to the bed and sat down next to me while he started tying it around his neck. The blue matched his eyes perfectly, and my insides gripped a little at the effect. The man was apparently a fox at all hours of the day. Seriously out of my league.

“I didn’t mean to wake you up,” he said as he wrestled with the fabric. “I just have a meeting in Toronto at ten, so I have to get going. You can go back to sleep, stay until whenever. Stay the week if you want. You could be here when I get back. Exactly like this.”

He wagged his eyebrows mischievously, and I giggled. His gaze roved openly, taking in all of the curves and parts of my body not covered by the sheet. “You have incredible hair, do you know that?”

I pulled a bedraggled lock off my shoulder and examined it critically. “Sure, sure. They call me carrot top.”

Brandon batted my hand away, forcing me to let my hair drop.

“Stop,” he ordered. “It’s the color of a damn sunset.” He leaned into me, tugging the strand in between his fingers to examine it. “There are about a million different shades of red and yellow and orange in here.”

“All the color of varieties of orange juice,” I proclaimed, but closed my mouth when he frowned at me.

“I said stop,” he said with a slight bark. “Do you always have such a hard time taking compliments?”

I shrugged. “Well, I am a quarter Jewish, you know.”

Brandon reached behind him and grabbed one of the goose-down pillows from the bed, swiftly bringing it around to whack me in the head.

“Aaah!” I shrieked. “You stop!”

He only whacked me again, and then proceeded to reach under the sheets and tickle me mercilessly.

“No!” I yelled in between whoops of laughter. “That’s... not...fair!” I glanced at the clock again. It was almost six-forty-five. “Aren’t you going to be late? What time is your flight?”

“Why, you wanna get rid of me?” He quirked his mouth shyly as he sat back up and finished tugging the Windsor knot into place. “Whenever I’m ready. The plane’s on stand-by at Logan.”

“Ah,” I echoed. “The plane.”

His brows furrowed as he finished his tie and he leaned in to kiss me again gently on the mouth.

“Skylar, I won’t make a big thing of it because I know it makes you uncomfortable—no,” he said when I opened my mouth to argue with him. “I know it does, so please don’t argue with me about it. All I’m saying is that while my wealth isn’t all of my life, it *is* part of it. I shouldn’t have to hide it.”

I stared down at the sheets, flexing my toes up at the bottom to tent the covers around my feet. “I just don’t ever

want you to think I like you for your money. Any of it.”

Brandon squeezed my hand. “I think you’ve made that point pretty clear up to now,” he said with a raised brow. “I hear FLS got a really nice donation last week.”

I blushed and yanked the covers over my head. “I’m sorry,” I said from under my tent, though I wasn’t. Not really.

“You know, half the lawyers at Sterling Grove donate their time there.”

“I know. Kieran told me.”

“You could do the same if you worked for me too.”

I popped my head out from under the sheet to frown at him. “I already turned that job down. I certainly can’t go back now that I’m sleeping with a freaking name partner.”

“Like there’s no nepotism at Harvard, land of the motherfucking legacy student,” Brandon scoffed. “How many of your classmates have jobs waiting for them at daddy’s firm, huh?”

I didn’t need to answer; we both knew he was right.

“So tell me, Red, what’s the difference between that and having your boyfriend set you up, huh?”

“Well, for one thing, no one says the partner’s son got there by sleeping with the boss!”

“Bah, no one’s going to want to get on the bad side of the boss’s girl,” he said with a dismissive wave. “No one would give a shit.”

“I disagree,” I retorted, hugging the sheets firmly against my chest. “If you’re the boss’s kid, people will think you’re a spoiled brat, but at least people might assume you’ve got the genetic goods to prove yourself at some point. Me, they’ll just assume I whored myself into the job. You know they will!”

“Goddammit!” Brandon gritted through his teeth as he smacked a hand into the comforter beside his leg. “I’m getting really tired of hearing you refer to yourself like that. Accepting a small gift from me from time to time doesn’t make you a prostitute, Skylar, it just makes you my girlfriend!”

“A job is not a little fucking gift, Brandon! And neither is a trip to Paris or a ten-thousand-dollar necklace!”

“So we’re back to this again?” He scowled at me, his fingers clenched over his knees. “You’re just determined to make getting a job as difficult for yourself as possible, aren’t you?”

“I just need to get the job myself, that’s all.”

He stood up and walked to the window, slammed his hand against the pane, and then whirled back around to face me. “For the record, Red, I wanted to hire you before I had even met you.”

My face softened as I toyed with the edge of the sheets. “I know.”

Brandon sighed. “Is it always going to be like this from now on? Fighting and fucking? Making love and getting piss mad at each other?”

I pressed my lips together and shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m not exactly known for being able to hold my temper.” I

pointed one finger at my hair. “Redhead. Cliché, I know.”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head, but gave me a small smile. “See, that’s what I’m talking about. I want to hire you because you have the makings to be a brilliant attorney. You’re smart, you’re fearless, and you fucking care about what you do, unlike most of the sharks at that place. You’d be an asset, I know it.”

“Thank you,” I murmured. “I...that means a lot, coming from you.”

He crossed back to the bed and sat down with me again, taking my hand in his. “So come work for me.”

My heart dropped again. Why couldn’t he just drop this? “Brandon, can’t you see why that’s a bad idea? Really?”

He pressed his thumb into the center of my palm, then curled his big hand around mine and squeezed. He exhaled, long and hard.

“Yeah,” he said finally. “I guess so. I just...I just want you close.” He shook his head. “Damn. It’s my fucking loss.”

I smiled and edged closer to him, pulling my hand from his so I could place my hands around his face to look at me. The sheet fell from its place around my chest, pooling at my waist, but he wasn’t distracted. I pulled him to me and pressed my lips to his.

“I think,” I said against his mouth, which was already nuzzling for more, “that we’ve gained a lot instead. Don’t you?”

In response he opened his mouth over mine and captured my lips, nipping and pecking as he pressed me back into the

pillows. His mouth drifted down, sucking on the delicate skin around my neck and moving farther down, to capture one of my nipples in my mouth.

“Ah,” I cried out as he bit it, lightly. “Don’t...mmm... don’t you have a flight to catch?”

“It’s my fucking plane,” he mumbled against my skin as he shifted to the other side, giving my other breast equally torturous attention.

He then sat up to kick off his shoes, loosen his belt, and unzip his pants. Before I could protest further, he had already applied a condom from the nightstand and maneuvered on top of me, pressing me further into the pillows so he could peer down with eyes luminous in the brightening sunlight.

“You are so goddamn beautiful,” he whispered as he slid quickly into me, his hardness causing me to wince slightly before I could relax around him with a groan of contentment.

I arched against him, straining to adjust to his size, but shocked by how willing and ready I was for him so quickly.

“Skylar,” he mumbled as he nipped at my mouth. “I need you. Just...ah, baby, fuck, you feel good...just one more time.”

He slipped a hand between us and started to move his index finger in circling against my clit, but I pulled it away, surprised to find I didn’t need it. That tension was building just the same.

Brandon stopped moving and pulled back to look at me. “You okay? Shit, babe, are you sore? I didn’t think to ask.”

“I’m fine,” I insisted, arching my hips up to meet his. “I just...Keep going, will you?”

As sensitized as I already was from the rest of the night, every nerve ending in my body was alight. The curve of him pressed against the exact right spot, the spot he’d tormented with his fingers so successfully that first night in my apartment and every orgasm since. I knew that if he kept going at that same, steady pace, I’d eventually explode around him without his extra help.

“You sure?” he asked, but he’d already started to thrust again. “Like that?”

I nodded. His arms moved up so he could balance himself on his forearms, weaving his fingers through my hair as he worked. His scent, fresh from his shower and utterly intoxicating, engulfed me, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, urging him closer.

“Please,” I muttered, “harder.”

He started to speed up his pace to a deeper, more unforgiving speed even while his lips were soft and tender against my neck and around my ear.

“Fuck, baby,” he muttered as I started to clench around him. “I can feel you squeezing me. You’re so fucking tight, Skylar.”

He was struggling now to regulate his pace, breathing hard as he worked hard to thrust even and deep. He pressed his head into the pillow next to me, his hands drifting down to grab my ass and lift it up roughly to meet him, blow for blow. The slight shift of position was all it took, and after just a few

more deep, penetrating pumps, my entire body began to shake as I came apart around him. He followed suit, and both our bodies seized together as we grasped, pawed at each other, completely filled with one another yet still desperate to get closer still.

His mouth clamped down on mine as we came, and his plundered my mouth like it was a life force, an anchor in a tide that threatened to carry him away. I wrapped my arms as tight as a vice. I felt the same way.

As the shaking subsided, we laid there, lifeless with his large body smashing mine into the soft mattress. He gave me one last long, lingering kiss before burying his face in my hair.

“I don’t want to go,” he said, nuzzling into side of my neck as he started to move again, very slowly. “You feel too fucking good. God, I can’t fucking get enough of you.”

I sighed. I understood the feeling all too well. Unfortunately, there was reality to contend with.

“You have a meeting at ten,” I reminded him, with obvious regret.

He groaned into my air, but still didn’t move. We lay there for a moment, listening to each other’s heartbeats until he finally slid out, grabbing some tissue next to bed to clean himself up as he removed the condom, threw it into the trash, and fixed his pants.

“I do have to go, goddamn it,” he said into my hair before he laid back down beside me. He gathered me close so I was nestled into his big frame, my naked back to his fully-clothed front. “But I’ll be back on Friday. Can I take you out then?”

Some place nicer than pizza this time? Nothing crazy, I promise.”

I traced the edge of the pillowcase with my finger, looking out the massive window where the sun was shining all over the bright white expanse of the Commons. The occasional small flakes would flurry off the tops of the trees in the wind, but the sky was a brilliant blue above the magical dreamscape. Eventually it would turn to gray slush built up on the side of the roads, but for a time Boston was the most beautiful place in the world.

I snuggled back into Brandon, allowing him to encase me completely in his strong arms, holding me against the warmth of his body. I’d miss him this week, more than I wanted to admit.

“Okay,” I whispered, finally letting go of the last vestiges of reserve I’d been holding onto. I just couldn’t do it anymore. “Your choice.”

Brandon sighed with utter content. He kissed me gently behind my ear and continued to hold me close until I had fallen back asleep watching light on the newly fallen snow.

~

Chapter 25

Between study groups, classes, and my time at the clinic, the next week flew by faster than I realized. Brandon and I had been trading texts and phone calls off and on all week, and we'd developed a natural rapport that gave me some faith in the future of our burgeoning relationship. His job required him to travel a fair amount, and God knew I'd be even busier than I already was come summer, when I'd hopefully be studying for the bar and preparing for a new job. I didn't want to stress about us on top of all of that. I was relieved to find that I wasn't worried about where he was when I wasn't talking to him—it was consistently clear that I was often on his mind, and I found that trust came more easily to me once I'd decided to let my guard down for good.

On Thursday night, I was putting the finishing touches on a paper for my Postmodern Law class when my phone buzzed on the surface of my desk. I picked it up and smiled.

Brandon: hey beautiful. how's the paper going?

Quickly, I typed in my response.

Me: good. almost finished. what are you up to?

Within less than a minute, my phone buzzed again. I opened a picture of a posh hotel room, taken from the vantage point of looking down Brandon's trim waist and legs toward a crackling fireplace. His shoes were off, and I could see his big socked feet crossed at the ankles over a small ottoman, a pint of beer in one hand at the far edge of the photo.

Again, I typed a short reply.

Me: u and your fireplaces. looks nice. jealous.

His reply buzzed almost immediately in my hand.

Brandon: wish u were too. miss u.

Before I had a chance to type something else, my phone rang, with Brandon's name and picture on the caller ID.

"Hey," I said, turning back to my paper. It was actually easier to multi-task when talking on the phone rather than texting.

"Hey yourself, Red," Brandon rumbled, his baritone slightly deeper from the late hour. "I just wanted to hear your voice."

I grinned, even though I knew he couldn't see me. "Thanks. It's nice to hear yours too."

"Thanks, hon. So listen, I know you've got to finish that paper, but I just wanted to check in about tomorrow."

As if I could have forgotten. He'd only brought it up literally every other time we'd talked over the past five days.

"Yeah," I said somewhat absently, having spotted a typo on my computer screen. I punched in a few keys to rectify the situation. "Dinner, right? Do you know what time you'll be in yet?" His schedule had been up in the air most of the week—something to do about the deal he was working on.

"Ah, yeah, probably sometime early afternoon. We're signing the papers at noon, thank fucking God, so hopefully I'll be able to get out of here right after that."

"That bad, huh?" I frowned at screen, trying to rework a particular sentence.

“I just want to see you, baby.”

His words set a small, warm fire in my belly, and suddenly grammatical errors didn't seem to matter so much. I swiveled around in my desk chair and propped my feet up on the edge of my bed, wrapping an arm around my waist as if somehow I could mimic his touch.

“I want to see you too,” I admitted, and immediately a hum of approval zipped through the phone back at me.

“Good. So, I was thinking I'd pick you up around six.”

I looked up at the ceiling, contemplating that schedule in my mind. “Six? Isn't that kind of early? I don't even finish at the clinic until five.”

“Oh.” The disappointment in his voice was palpable. “Well, I was thinking I'd get tickets for something, and then we could go to dinner later. Do something nice since it's Valentine's Day and all. But I wanted to check with you first.”

My feet practically collapsed off the bed as I registered his words. “Ahh...” I stuttered as I quickly scrambled back to the computer to check my calendar. There it was, right at the top of the Friday box: February 14. The stupid holiday hadn't even been on my radar.

Immediately I spun around and leapt out of my chair, making a stealth dash for my closet while I tried to keep him on the line. “Sure...yeah...what kind of tickets?”

He chuckled, low and satisfied. He probably knew he was catching me completely by surprise, the bastard.

“I don't think I can tell you that yet, Red. Gotta keep some things a surprise, don't you think?”

“I don’t know...I sort of like predictability.” I thumbed through my clothes, trying to decide if I had anything decent enough to wear out for Valentine’s Day with a man like this. I stopped for a moment, deciding to focus my energy instead on convincing him to divulge his plans. “Plus, you don’t exactly have the best track record with surprises.”

“I think I’ve done all right,” he purred, and I realized he wasn’t just talking about gifts. An image of the two of us bent over in his workshop last weekend flashed through my mind. Okay, so he wasn’t *so* bad at surprises.

“Come on,” I wheedled, deciding to try a different tactic. I pulled one dress, and then another—all of them a basic, boring black. “A girl’s got to plan her wardrobe. Don’t you want me to look all sexy for you?” I tried to make my voice sound light and flirtatious, but I failed miserably.

He burst out laughing. “Babe, you know the ‘gotta please my man’ shtick doesn’t really work for you, right?”

“Gah!” I erupted, frustrated. I slammed my hand into my closet door. “Okay, can you just tell me whether or not it’s formal? Going to the opera is pretty different than going to see a band, you know?”

“Hmmm.” He was so obviously enjoying this. I rolled my eyes and stamped my feet, even though I knew he couldn’t see me.

“I think,” he said finally, “that you’ll be fine in a dress. Something that shows off your legs.”

“Brandon!”

“I’m just kidding!” He laughed through the phone so hard that I couldn’t help but giggle with him. “Okay, you’ll want to dress up a little. But it’s not black tie or anything.”

“That’s really no help at all!” I screeched.

“Red?” he asked, his voice suddenly sweet. Its calming effect was immediate.

“Yes.”

“It’s just a date, not the Oscars. I can give you until sixty-three if you really need it, but that’s it. If Kieran tries to make you stay late, you can tell her I’m giving my funding for FLS to the business school instead.”

I snorted. “Yeah, I bet that would go over well.” I wasn’t worried. I could splurge on a cab if I needed to get back in time to get ready. If I could figure out something to wear in the first place.

“And baby? You’ll look gorgeous no matter what. Wear a paper bag if you want. I just want to spend the evening with you.”

I took a deep breath. I still had no idea what to wear, but his adoration was touching. I exhaled slowly.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll figure it out. Brandon?”

“What, Red?”

“No gifts. I mean it.”

He chuckled again. “We’ll see.”

“I *mean* it!” I yelled.

“Okay, okay, I got it. Listen, I need to finish up some stuff and get some sleep. See you tomorrow, beautiful.”

“See you then,” I said, feeling my insides once more turn to goo. “Bye.”

I tossed my phone onto the bed, all thoughts of my paper temporarily cast aside.

“Jane?” I knew my night-owl roommate would still be up.

“Yeah?” she called from across the small hallway.

I glanced back at my wardrobe, which was full of the same old clothes I’d been wearing forever. My bank account wasn’t going to like me very much this month, but there wasn’t much to be done about that. “You want to go shopping again tomorrow? I’m going to need a new dress.”

~

After I was finished with my paper a few hours later, I found myself too ramped up about my date the next night to study before going to sleep, which was unfortunate considering I had a lot to do the next day. Between my regular clinic hours and finding a dress appropriate for some kind of nondescript “tickets” event, I was barely going to have time to get in my regular studying and a swim before I met up with Brandon.

And yet...there I was, lying on top of my bed like a grumpy teenager at nine o’clock at night. Rolling to my side, I glanced at the picture on my bedside table of me, my dad, and Bubbe on the day I graduated from NYU. The giant purple graduation gown always made me cringe. Not only had it made me look like Barney, the bright purple almost turned my

hair fluorescent in comparison. But it was one of the few pictures I had of the three of us. Someone had taken it candidly by mistake; while I was giving a cheesy, perfunctory smile at the camera, Dad and Bubbe were beaming at me, their eyes glossy with pride and love. I loved that picture because it reminded me of how critical they'd been to my life—how I wouldn't be a fraction of the person I was if I hadn't had their unconditional support my entire life.

Bubbe's face had been decidedly darker when she'd mentioned the ticket she'd found in Dad's pockets. He hadn't owned up to anything when I'd spoken to him. It had been a few weeks since then. Maybe it was time for a serious call. He needed to know I loved him enough to care too.

Dad's cell phone rang two times before it went to voicemail. I checked the clock. It was possible he had a gig, but usually he only took them on Friday and Saturdays because of his early morning hours during the week. Still, even though he usually had to be up by five, he wasn't likely to be asleep before ten o'clock. I decided to try the LAN line at the house.

Bubbe, of course, picked up after only one ring. "Hello?"

"Hey Bubbe, it's me."

"Skylar, *bubbela!* What are you doing calling here? Is everything all right?"

"Oh, sure, it's fine. I was just trying to call Dad, but he wasn't picking up. Thought I'd try here. Is he there?"

I heard a brief scratching over the phone, as if she was writing something down. Probably Sudoku—Bubbe was a

sucker for games.

“Your father? No, Daniel’s not here. In fact...”

She trailed off, taking a deep breath that signified to me clearly she was about to get into a subject of major interest. In Bubbe’s world, that either meant one of two things: gossip or tragedy. My stomach clenched as I waited to hear which one it was.

“Believe it or not, your father...is on...a date!” she crowed.

I nearly dropped the phone in shock. My father was the consummate bachelor—I had literally seen him go on maybe two dates that didn’t involve my mother my entire life. I was never sure if that was because he still carried a torch for my mother, or if it was because he was so ruined by that relationship that he was never interested in taking that kind of risk again. But on both of the dates, he’d come home before ten, sat down at the piano without saying a word, and played until Bubbe had thrown a newspaper at him so he’d stop and she could fall asleep.

“Are you sure?” I asked once I’d recovered my voice. “A date? Really?”

“Sure I’m sure,” Bubbe insisted. “I know because they even stopped by to pick something up at the house before they left for dinner. I actually got to meet her!”

I frowned. I was slightly hurt. Dad wasn’t just on a date—he’d been dating someone long enough to bring home to meet his mother. And he hadn’t mentioned it to me.

“Well, what’s she like?” I asked, trying to mask the pain I felt with an upbeat tone. “What’s her name?”

“Well,” said Bubbe, clearly delighted to be the first to impart the news. “She’s a little thing like us. Good thing, since my Daniel’s no giant. She’s pretty, a bit young for him, but not too flashy. She’s from Queens originally, and half-Jewish, she said, on her mother’s side. I know her grandmother, Rachel Kremen, because we used to go to the same temple when we were girls. Good family, although they’re reform, you know —”

“Bubbe,” I interrupted somewhat impatiently. “What was her name?”

“Oh, yes, it was...ah...Katie...Katie Corleone. Her father’s Italian, of course, but she *is* half-Jewish.”

“Yes, you already said that, Bubbe.” I was already pulling my computer off my desk and opening up Facebook. The name Katie Corleone sounded kind of familiar, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. Bubbe continued to describe the details of her face, her hair, her clothes, and any other elements of her general personality she could come up with while I typed in the name and location and perused the list of faces that came up. There were a few Katie Corleones in Brooklyn, but none that looked like the person Bubbe was describing to me, and none that looked familiar.

After a few more minutes, I closer my browser and shut my laptop.

“You don’t say,” I murmured as Bubbe recounted the latest gossip from that week’s Canasta game. I glanced at the clock. It was now close to ten. I desperately wanted to call my dad

again, but I didn't want to interrupt his first legitimate romance in almost twenty years. Poor Dad; all I'd ever wanted for him was someone who would really love him for the kind, caring person I knew him to be.

"All right, *bubbela*," Bubbe said. "I have to get sleep. I'll tell Daniel you called when he comes back."

"Sure thing, Bubbe. Give Dad my love, and you too."

"My love to you."

I hung up the phone and tapped at my desk for a few more seconds. A date. Really? It was hard to wrap my head around, and I still couldn't help but feel the sting of being left out of the conversation.

~

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Chapter 26

I was waiting in the small lobby of my building when the increasingly familiar Mercedes pulled up to the curb outside.

“Dang, that is a *nice* car!”

Ray, one of the other denizens leaving the building, ogled the black behemoth with a whistle. I shook my head and followed him out.

“How are you this evening, Ms. Crosby?” asked David as he opened the back door for me.

The students watched openly as I quickly approached the kind driver. I wanted to get in and go before I attracted any more unwelcome attention from my classmates. Ray was in one of my classes—I knew I’d be getting an earful on Monday.

“Fine, thank, David,” I replied. “You?”

“Just swell, thank you,” he said with a brief nod.

I slid inside the plush interior, where I found Brandon looking disappointedly at my coat.

“I thought you were going to dress up!” he complained, reaching out to touch the plain, heather gray lines of my wool coat.

The car started to move, and I fastened my seatbelt before answering him. I tip the toe of my black Manolos at him, also pointing to the sheer black hose I had on.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I did. And you’ll like it, I promise. But if I wore this dress in this weather without a coat, I’d

probably freeze to death.”

It had snowed yet again that week, but thankfully wasn't in the forecast for tonight. Boston was still covered in white, but it was about this time of year that the fantasy of it all became more onerous than fun. I didn't think my Manolos could take another schlep through snowdrift.

“Well, this is for you.”

“Brandon!”

I started to protest what was probably another needlessly expensive gift before I saw that all he held out to me was a single red rose, probably the kind he could buy at a newsstand. It was wrapped with a bit of cellophane and garnished with Queen Anne's Lace. Gingerly, I took it from his fingers and held it to my nose, inhaling its faint, sweet scent.

“It's perfect,” I murmured, charmed by the simple token. I twiddled the soft petals around my face and look at Brandon. “Thank you.”

“Well, I had to at least get you flowers. Or, a flower.”

He smiled shyly in brief acknowledgment of my thanks, but I was too busy taking in his own dapper appearance to care. He wore all black underneath his wool overcoat: a black three-piece suit fitted with a starched black shirt and tie underneath, and polished, black leather wingtips shoes that were crossed casually over each other. It wasn't much different from his normal business wear except for the lack of color. The contrast of the black with the mop of blond that he'd allowed to go unusually wavy made him look even more like a lion than usual. He looked positively edible.

His smile disappeared as he watched the trajectory of the rosebud as it fluttered over my cheeks and hovered over my lips. His pupils dilated slightly, and he continued to stare at my mouth as he absently reached to unbuckle his seatbelt in order to slide closer to where I sat.

“Come here,” Brandon commanded, dipping his head to nuzzling into the collar of my coat to access the soft skin at my nape. “God, you smell good. I missed you this week, you know that?”

His nose trailed up my neck and around my jaw while a big hand reached around to thread its fingers into the waves that hung loose over my shoulders. He pulled my face toward his and fit his mouth securely on mine, begging entrance with his tongue as he worked to taste as much of me as he could. I couldn't help but respond in kind. He savored my lips, suckling at each, and nipping the bottom lip one, two, three time before he finally released me. It took me as many seconds to catch my breath. His hand stayed entangled in my hair at the base of my neck while he stared, slowly pushing air out of his pursed lips.

“Okay, I have to stop,” he said. “Otherwise I'm not going to be able to, and that would embarrass the hell out of David. He already has to wear headphones.” He shook his head. “Is it possible that you became even more alluring while I was gone?” He dove in for another quick peck, then released me, slid back to his own seat, but still kept one hand lingering on my bared knee.

“Say something,” he said. “Preferably something unsexy, if that's even possible for you. Shit, do I have lipstick on my

face?”

I giggled as he dug a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and started blotting his mouth furiously. I opened my own clutch, a vintage beaded piece I'd found with Jane that morning, and pulled out my hand mirror and lipstick to reline my lips with the dark red color Jane had also chosen for me. It wasn't in my normal style wheelhouse, but it definitely fit with my look that night. When I finished, I shut the purse and looked up to find Brandon staring at me, desire etched so fiercely into his handsome features that a small line had appeared between his brows.

I raised mine, amused. “You all right over there?”

“I don't know what I was thinking,” he said, shaking his head. Then he pushing out another slow, labored breath as he rubbed a large hand over his face. “It's going to be a long night, Red. A long damn night.”

~

The car pulled to a stop outside a building similar to many of the ones adorning the Harvard campus, with their brick exteriors and white ionic columns. Although there was little in the way of signage out front, I recognized it instantly, as any classically trained musician would.

“You got us symphony tickets?!” I pressed my hands against the cold glass of the window, eager as a schoolchild.

I had regularly scrounged student tickets to the New York Philharmonic until I graduated from NYU, but I had only found time to see the Boston Symphony play a few times in the nearly three years I had been here. I didn't even care what

they were playing; this was a treat. It was also incredibly thoughtful, given my background.

“I thought you might like it. I know absolutely nothing about classical music, Red, but Margie said this was supposed to be a good performance. I’m trusting you to educate me.”

After David opened his door to let him out, Brandon came around to open mine. I stepped out of the car and threw my hands around his neck, much to his surprise.

“I love it,” I whispered into his ear. “Thank you so much.”

He wrapped an arm around my waist and lifted me off my feet so he could nuzzle into my neck again. The rasp of his five-o’clock shadow scraped deliciously against the sensitive skin under my ear.

“Glad you like it, gorgeous.” His low voice vibrated with pleasure. “I’d kiss you, but I’m pretty sure I won’t be able to stop this time, and then we’ll miss the whole thing.” He set me gently back down on the ground, and offered the crook of his arm. “So, shall we?”

We followed the scattered groups people making their way into the historic building, funneling through the brass doors into a small lobby. I accepted a program from one of the ticket agents, and gaped at the cover.

“Oh my god, we’re seeing Caleb Chung?” I yelped, tugging on Brandon’s coat sleeve. “Do you *know* who that is?”

Brandon grinned and shrugged. He didn’t; I’d have to send a note of thanks to his assistant at some point. As we made our way to the coat check, I continued to babble giddily about the performance.

“He’s probably the best pianist in the world right now,” I told him as I let Brandon help me out of my coat. “Total prodigy—apparently he started playing at two or something crazy like that. Seriously, people call him the next Glenn Gould. Damn, and he’s playing Beethoven’s Concerto Number Four? Do you have any idea how amazing this is going to be? Brandon?”

After a few more seconds without a response, I turned around to find Brandon standing in front of the coat check box, still clutching both our coats while he gaped at me. His mouth actually hung slightly ajar.

I blushed and walked back to where he stood, watching his gaze follow my form without blinking the entire way.

“Everything all right?” I asked softly. I gently removed the coats from his hands and gave it to the coat check attendant, who handed me a chip to tuck into my purse with a knowing smirk. I gave him a small smile and turned back to Brandon.

“Damn, Red,” he said. “You weren’t kidding about the dress.”

There was such an intense mix of awe and naked lust on Brandon’s face that I immediately started to blush. I looked down instead, surveying the outfit that Jane and I had come up with.

I couldn’t have told you at the time why I had been so intent on finding something special. I wasn’t a huge shopper, although I did like fashion. While living in Paris, I had come to appreciate the power of the classic lines and simple patterns that epitomized French style. When I did invest in new clothes, I bought pieces I thought would last a long time and

go with everything. It made for a consistent style that I could count on, but the simple black and neutral separates the made up the majority of my wardrobe didn't exactly scream "special occasion."

This dress, however, definitely did. After dragging me through about five overpriced shops on Newberry Street, Jane had ended up taking me through a few vintage boutiques around Porter Square until we landed in a tiny shop that sold a mix of vintage and vintage-inspired clothes. The owner had taken one look at me and pulled the dress I was now wearing. It was dark red, crushed velvet—a nineteen-thirties-inspired, bias-cut frock hemmed just below my knees. The modest neckline draped Grecian style across my collarbone, and then dropped directly to my waist from the shoulder, as it was completely backless. Because of the back (or lack thereof), I wore sheer black, thigh-high stockings (instead of tights) to match the charmeuse lining of the dress. My hair was pinned on one side and spiraled down my back in generous barrel curls. The deep red lipstick Jane had chosen for me matched the dress—and my coloring—perfectly.

Maybe I didn't know at the time why I needed such a special dress, but I knew now. The look on Brandon's face told me everything.

"Brandon?" I smiled, shy despite the fact that this was exactly the reaction I was hoping for. I felt like a million dollars.

He blinked, finally pulling his stare up to meet mine. He shook his head again.

“You,” he said as he dropped his hand to stroke my bare back, “are going to kill me tonight. Come on, let’s find our seats before I combust right here in the lobby.”

After looking at our tickets, the ushers directed us up two flights of stairs. Brandon led me down a narrow hallway to a door that opened onto a shallow balcony that wound all the way around the perimeter of the long, narrow auditorium. I had learned about it in school—the massive ceilings and slightly curved walls of the stage were some of the first built with modern understandings of acoustics in mind, and the shallow balconies prevented the sound from being absorbed and muffled by too many bodies and plush surroundings.

Brandon guided me down to a pair of empty seats in the first row of the corner balcony that looked almost directly over the orchestra, who were now starting the process of taking their seats and tuning their instruments. From where we sat, I could see everything: the musicians’ facial expressions as they closed their eyes and listened, the glossy texture of the hardwood floor beneath them, the shadows cast by the massive chandeliers hanging above us. The dissident notes of various instruments were clear and unhindered by the audience’s chatter.

We had the best seats in the house.

I turned to Brandon. “This was too much. Way too much. I would have been impressed sitting in the back row.”

“Skylar, hasn’t it occurred to you by at this point that I might like the nice things in life too?” he chaffed as he slung his arm around the back of my seat, giving his fingers room to toy with my bare shoulder blades. “I’m not about to squash

myself into the cheap seats just because my girlfriend's the one person on the planet who hates money."

I blushed. There was that word again: "girlfriend." He'd used it a few times, but it was when we were in the middle of a fight, and at the end of our first official date. I'd assumed it was a hypothetical statement, but maybe not. I was more surprised, however, by how I wanted the latter to be the case. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm being a bit self-absorbed, aren't I?"

Brandon just winked and squeezed my shoulder, clearly happy he'd won the argument. "Don't worry about it. Just enjoy the show, all right?"

I grinned. The lights in the giant hall dimmed, and the audience began to clap as the conductor walked onto the stage and took a bow. He was followed by Chang, the pianist, for whom the applause grew even louder.

"It's a performance, just so you know," I said, leaning into Brandon's ear. "No one calls it a show."

That earned me a massive eye roll. "I may have the money, Red, but *you're* the snob."

~

The performance was amazing, of course. I spent most of it with my eyes closed, which sort of defeated the purpose of the box seats. Brandon seemed more into it than I would have expected, though, as he spent most of the time watching the musicians below with an obvious fascination that couldn't be faked. He leaned over multiple times to ask me what this and that instrument was, and was particularly curious about what the conductor did. At the end of the final movement, when

conductor turned to the audience, Brandon was among the first to jump out of his seat, clapping furiously, and whistling as various musicians stepped forward to take their bows.

“That was something else,” he kept saying as we filed toward the lobby with the rest of the patrons. “Really amazing.”

“I’m surprised you’ve never been before,” I remarked. “You seem like the kind of person they would probably court pretty intensely for donations.”

Brandon nodded, acknowledging the truth in the statement. “Oh, they do,” he said. “But I haven’t actually been since I was a lot younger. I didn’t know anything about it, and it was incredibly slow and depressing music. I give them money because I know things like this are important to a lot of people, but I never really wanted to go again. Idiot.”

“Well, I’m glad you liked it this time,” I said with a grin, reaching down to squeeze his hand. I’d never dated anyone who actually enjoyed going to the symphony with me; most guys acted like it was tantamount to being water-boarded. I was even more flattered now that he’d gone out of his way to take me here, considering he obviously *had* thought he’d be bored to tears.

It became just how valued a donor he was when, as we reentered the lobby, we were almost immediately accosted by various people associated with the orchestra, some of whom I gathered were either trustees or involved with the marketing. All of them seemed delighted that he’d actually made an appearance to the venue; it appeared this really was one of the first times he’d ever come. To all of them, Brandon kindly

introduced me as his date, and just as kindly dismissed their attentions as we slowly made our way to collect our coats.

“Do you have the token for the coat check?” he asked once we were closer to the lobby entrance.

I nodded and fished it out of my purse. “Here.”

“I’ll be right back,” he said, and leaned in to give me a quick kiss on the cheek before he turned to join the small line at the coat check.

“Skylar?”

I turned around to see a familiar face in the crowds making its way toward me. My stomach dropped. Shit.

“Hey, Jared,” I greeted him, allowing him to take my hands and give me a brief kiss on the cheek.

“Wow,” he said, looking me over frankly. “You look amazing.”

“Thanks,” I replied. “So do you.”

Jared looked his usual handsome self, if slightly more dressed up in khaki slacks, a light pink dress shirt, and a navy sport coat. His hair was combed neatly to the side. He looked like a Brooks Brothers advertisement.

“So, what are you doing here tonight?” he asked. “I’ve never seen you here before. My family has season tickets, so I come all the time. Are you interested in classical music?”

“She’s actually an amazing pianist.”

Brandon’s deep voice boomed behind me, and I felt the touch of a hand slip around my waist. Jared’s eyes zeroed in

on the hand and back up to Brandon. His expression was not particularly friendly.

“Jared Rounsaville,” he said as he offered a stiff handshake. “And you are?”

“Brandon Sterling,” Brandon responded casually, returning handshake without removing his other hand from my waist. My gaze bounced between the two like I was watching a ping pong match.

Jared’s mouth dropped slightly before he recovered in time to speak. “As in, Sterling Grove?”

“And Ventures,” Brandon replied with a slight smirk. I nudged his ankle with my foot, but he didn’t alter his expression. “How do you know Skylar?”

“Oh, we’ve gone out a few times. We know each other from school.” Jared directed a knowing look at me. “I’m surprised she didn’t tell you.”

I frowned uneasily. “Brandon and I haven’t known each other very long, Jared.”

“Didn’t you intern at his firm?”

I could feel the flush rising up my neck at the question. I didn’t know how he knew that—I hadn’t mentioned the internship to him—but these sorts of connections were always going to be made by people eventually. I just wasn’t ready for it to happen quite yet. Especially by a guy I’d just blown off for coursework less than two weeks ago.

“I don’t have much to do with interns,” Brandon stepped in gracefully. He released my waist and captured my hand instead, giving it a comforting squeeze. “We actually didn’t

meet until after she finished up and refused a job there.” He looked down at me and smiled. “Lucky me.”

“Lucky you,” Jared replied blandly as his eyes darted between us. He cleared his throat. “Well. I guess I’d better be going.” He stared back to me, his brown eyes sharp and unforgiving. “I’ll be seeing you, Skylar.”

“See you, Jared,” I replied weakly, giving a pathetic wave as he turned to make his way back to his parents, who stood waiting for him by the entrance.

“I’ll have to find out for what dates the Rounsavilles’ tickets are,” Brandon remarked dryly as he watched Jared and his family leave. “Otherwise we are never coming here again.”

I sighed, although not without relief. If that meant we were less likely to run into Jared in social situations again, I wasn’t going to fight it. Brandon looked down at me to confirm, but his wry expression quickly morphed into one of overt lust as his eyes traced the curves of my body outlined in clingy velvet. His gaze was so explicit that I fought the urge to yank my coat away from him and throw it over my head in response.

Brandon sighed and shook his head. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with you, baby,” he said as he draped my coat over my shoulders and then pulled on his own. “If you’re not making me want to have my way with you in front of my driver, you’re making me want to punch the lights out of all the other men who want to do it too.”

“Hey, now,” I protested. “You can’t blame me when you asked for the damn thing in the first place. I thought you liked my dress.”

Brandon only shook his head and blew a long sigh as he perused my body again, making me feel naked even with the added layer of my overcoat. “Nope. It’s a lost cause.” He grabbed my hand and pulling me toward the curb, where David stood dutifully next to the Mercedes. “Come on, Red. Let’s go back to the house before I get arrested for public indecency.”

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Chapter 27

We pulled up to the house on Beacon Street some time past eleven after lingering over an amazing dinner at the new French-American restaurant a few blocks from Symphony Hall. I was stuffed with a five-course meal of oysters, endive salad, roasted quail, some kind of chocolate confection, and a post-meal *digestif* following several glasses of wine. It had been an incredible evening, to say the least, and I was more than ready to continue it somewhere private. If the constant looks and increasingly suggestive pinches were any indication, so was Brandon.

“Am I already a foregone conclusion?” I teased as we stepped out of the car.

David pulled away from the curb, presumably to park the car in the garage below the house. Brandon took my hand and led me up the stone steps to the grand double doors of the house. He smirked as he took out his keys.

“Well, I could have tried to angle my way up to your place for a night cap. Could we actually fit into that bed of yours?”

I giggled as I followed him inside. His long legs would probably hang about six inches off the end of my small double mattress. The door shut tightly behind us, and he helped me remove my coat, trailing his fingers down my bare back as he did.

“Where’s Ana tonight?” I asked over my shoulder.

“I told her to take the night off after she was done here.” Brandon traced his fingertips over the fabric that fell just

below the small of my back. I hummed in response and arched slightly into his touch.

The living room, with its bright fire characteristically shining a warm light over the plush white interior, looked even more inviting than I remembered. On a wine-addled whim, I slipped off my shoes and padded in my stockinged feet to the center of the room in front of the couch, where I sank into floor and lay flat to feel the buttery softness of the sheepskin rug on my naked back

“Mmmm,” I purred, twisting on the skin like a cat on warm concrete. “I’ve been wanting to do this since I first saw this room.”

There was no immediate response, so I tipped my head up to find Brandon leaning against one of the big wood beam foundations that guarded the entrance of the room, rubbing his chin meditatively as he stared down at me. I pressed my lips together in a sly smile.

“Cat got your tongue?” I asked, propping myself up on my elbows.

He opened and closed his mouth a few times, as if he couldn’t quite get out what he wanted to say. I waited patiently, my sense of mischief fading as I watched him clearly struggle so much to find the correct words for...whatever was on his mind.

“You just...in the firelight,” he spoke quietly at last. “In that dress, with your hair all glowing all around you. You look like some kind of...I don’t know...primeval fire goddess.” He looked up, tapping his chin thoughtfully with one finger. “Wasn’t Hestia the Greek goddess of fire? Of hearth and

home, right?” His glance flickered to the crackling hearth and then back to me, and he smiled. “It fits.”

“If you say so,” I said as I laid back down on the rug and stretched my arms over my head, eager to unwind after hours of sitting. “But I think Hestia was also an incorruptible virgin. I am definitely not.”

“Thank God for that.”

Brandon slipped off his shoes next to mine, then removed his coat and jacket. His big shoulders rose and fell with each step as he stalked toward me and then gracefully stretched his body alongside mine. He lay on his side, head propped up by his elbow while the other arm slipped comfortably over my waist. His face was now lit by the fire too, which rendered his mussed waves gold, his own primordial halo.

“So,” he said. “Good Valentine’s Day?”

I grinned. “The best. Really, Brandon, it was amazing. Thank you so much.”

He nodded bashfully. “I know, I know. You haven’t stopped thanking me all evening. I’m glad you had a good time, Red. I did too.” His fingers traced absent circles over my stomach. “I wasn’t sure, you know, how it would measure up.”

I frowned. “What do you mean, measure up?”

Brandon shrugged, unwilling to meet my eyes. He was suddenly very occupied with smoothing out the wrinkled texture of my dress.

“Well...you haven’t really mentioned anyone else,” he said slowly, affecting a completely transparent nonchalance. “Like, for instance, Mike Seaver back there at the symphony?”

I smirked. “Did you just reference *Growing Pains*?”

He shrugged again and offered a casual grin. “I liked that show when I was a kid.”

“So did my dad. God, you’re old,” I joked, earning a quick pinch at my waist. I jumped, but the hand at my waist kept me from moving too far.

“So you guys dated?” Brandon prompted, suddenly engrossed with removing an imaginary piece of lint off my hip. I slipped my hand down to still fingers, prompting him to look back up at me.

“We went on one date. A few weeks ago. Then...”

“I came along?” he suggested with an impishly raised brow.

“You could say that.” I shrugged and leaned in to kiss him briefly, but the hand at my waist pulled me in for something more involved. A few moments later we separated, both breathing significantly harder. His fingers resumed their lingering strokes over my waist and hip.

“But you *did* live in Paris for a year, right?” he asked. “City of love...I’m sure you had a few frogs put the moves on you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Hardly. Well, it’s not that no one did, but that year...well, most of that year I spent either alone in museums or trying and failing to have a relationship with my mother.” I looked up at him, where he was not watching me intently. “She lives just outside of Paris with her family. And, like I told you, they were, um, busy most of the time I was there.”

I didn't add that she had only managed to make one of our scheduled dinner dates the entire time I'd lived there and hadn't once invited me to her house to meet my siblings. I had spent most of the year moping around museums and practicing the piano, playing the occasional performance with other NYU Paris music students. My mother never came to any of them. I was miserable in Paris, and had taken the first plane back to New York as soon as my finals were over.

Brandon watched me carefully, obviously reading in between the lines of my statements. I was actually surprised myself that he didn't know about my estranged relationship from Janette from all of his research. It seemed he'd been good on his word and thrown it away.

"So whisking you off to Paris really wasn't the best idea," he finally muttered.

I raised my shoulders in response. What could I say?

"And so, there's never been anyone else...special?" he wondered, returning to the subject of my romantic history yet again. "I find that hard to believe."

Now it was my turn to avoid his gaze. "Ah...I wouldn't say that. There was one...guy."

"Tell me."

The command was quiet, but unmistakable. I sighed. I didn't really like talking about Patrick, but Brandon deserved to know what he was getting into. Apparently Valentine's Day was over.

"His name was Patrick Harlow," I relented, ready to get the story over with as quickly as I could. "I met him while I

was an intern at Goldman Sachs. He worked there too. We used to hook up casually, and then we started dating after I graduated and came on as a junior associate. We worked a lot of long hours together, so it developed...naturally, I guess.”

I squirmed uneasily at the word—it didn’t come close to describing how I’d felt with Patrick. He’d had the ability that some men have to make a woman feel like she’s the center of his world in one breath, and completely inconsequential the next. I was constantly chasing his wavering approval and attention, the pursuit of which had led me into a lot of situations I regretted.

“Was he good to you?”

I looked up. “No,” I said quietly. “He was not.”

The hand on my stomach paused, its fingertips clenching slightly at the fabric.

“How?” It was amazing how one small word could carry so much vitriol.

I exhaled roughly through my nose and looked away. “Brandon, you really don’t want to hear this—”

“Skylar,” he said gently. His hand slipped up the rest of my side and stroked my cheek lightly. “I do. I promise I won’t be mad. Well, not at you, anyway. But I want to know *everything* about you, just like you want to know about me. So please just tell me what that shit head did, if you can.”

I sighed again, and gave in. The story, for all that I had rarely told it to anyone, came relatively easy. I told him about how it had started sweetly, with flirtatious instant messages and late night drinks while we worked on deals together, and

eventually a few casual hookups. It seemed like a natural progression from our work life when it turned into something more. He was a good Jewish boy from New Jersey, which endeared him to my grandmother while he gained my dad's favor with nice bottles of whiskey and Mets tickets. I recounted how Patrick had introduced me to all his family and friends too, paraded me around Montclair like I was a model, called me his "little firefly" and his good luck charm when his career really started to take off. I was, in his words, "his most precious possession."

But then he started to turn more hot and cold. There were always those moments where I thought he might have been unfaithful—he'd forget to call me for an entire weekend, then show up on Monday with a Tiffany box. He was angry at my decision to leave the world of finance for law school, and accused me of wanting to whore it up with strange men in Boston, and he'd often punish me with passive aggressive comments in front of friends and family, or more unexplained absences. And yet I couldn't quite let go.

My attempts to regain his affections became increasingly desperate as I agreed to more and more outlandish escapades, far outside of my comfort zone, to appease him. The week after I gave notice at Goldman, his friends caught us having sex in a supply closet. The way it happened, with preemptive laughter echoing before the door even opened, made me suspect he had planned the whole thing. After all, Patrick had wanted to continue while they watched. When he'd visit me at Harvard, I'd often go with him to strip clubs in an attempt to "spice things up"; he wanted me to watch the strippers give him a lap dance so I could "practice the moves at home." As a

last resort to save our ailing relationship, I even tried a threesome once, only to be pushed off the bed while a two-bit barfly gave my soon-to-be ex blowjob. Less than a month later, we were through for good. I hadn't spoken to him since.

"That was two years ago," I concluded.

Brandon was silent for a moment, staring into the flames behind me as he digested all the details. I waited nervously for his reaction. Would he think me disgusting now? Slutty? Pitiful? I had thought all of those things about myself once too; it had taken Jane a long time to convince me otherwise.

"I...don't understand," he said finally, running his hand back through his hair.

I looked away in shame. "I know. It's hard to explain. None of it's that bad, really. I stayed. It's hard to explain why it was so hard to just leave him." I couldn't even explain that to myself most of the time.

"No, Red, that's not it." A large finger tugged my chin back up so I could see his face. He looked at me kindly, without pity, but there was a trace of fire behind the sweet expression. "It's not you," he clarified. "It was him. Shit head doesn't even begin to cover it. God, he's lucky he's not here right now; I want to punch his manipulative fuckin' lights out."

His tone was calm, but I could hear the slight lilt of Brandon's accent, betraying his underlying rage.

"Does he still work at Goldman?" he asked.

"I don't know. I think he got in trouble when the subprime market collapsed last year, so maybe not. I honestly don't care

anymore.” I blanched, concentrating instead on twisting the soft hair of the sheepskin with my fingers. “Please don’t go looking, all right? I don’t need a white knight with a vendetta. I’ve already been with someone that possessive, and it was awful.”

Brandon exhaled through his nose multiple times, clearly doing what he could to calm himself down. “I just don’t understand how a man—if you can even call him that—could not see what he has in front of him. How he could fuck up the best thing—the best person—he could ever hope for in his pathetic excuse for a life.”

“Things change,” I replied weakly, rolling to my back to look up at the ceiling. The firelight flickered unpredictably against the shadows of the wide beams. “You can be in love in the beginning, but it can always turn to shit. I learned that the hard way.”

“Then it wasn’t really love to begin with.”

We laid there for a few more moments, watching each other’s faces silently in the golden reflections of the fire. Far removed from the frustrated lust he had obviously felt at the beginning of the evening, Brandon’s expression was no less fierce, perhaps even more potent.

“You’re hard to read tonight,” I said finally, not so much to break the silence, but to break up the runaway nature of my own thoughts. I was running dangerously close to putting cart before the horse.

“I just...I want you to know something. And I don’t want you to freak out about it.” He blinked down at me, his blue eyes wide and scared. “I...I don’t know how to do this slow

with you, Skylar. But I'm trying. I just want you to know... that with whatever we're doing here, I'm all in."

He took a deep breath and opened his mouth, as if he wanted to say something more. In the end, though, he just exhaled and repeated himself, like a mantra. "I'm all in."

I said nothing as he watched closely for my reaction. About a million thoughts skittered through my mind. I wanted to shout that I felt the exact same way. I wanted to say that his touch made my skin feel like it was as alight as the flames next to us, that I'd never felt a connection so powerful, so immediate. Not with Patrick; not with anyone. I wanted to tell Brandon he could have my heart and soul if he wanted those too—that maybe he already did, despite my fears. But a small voice in my head—the one who remembered the way the last fire I'd engaged had burned me so badly—screamed the obvious. It was too soon. We barely knew each other. There was plenty of time for things to progress naturally.

So instead, I lifted a hand up and threaded my fingers through his thick hair, urging him close so I could say to him with my kiss what I couldn't yet express out loud.

It appeared to be all the encouragement he needed. His lips pressed delicately at first, but the kiss soon deepened as I begged entry with my tongue, meeting his with the same urgency. I wanted him closer. I wanted to swallow him whole.

His large shoulders blotted out the light of the fire as he moved to kneel between my legs, gently running his hand up the sides up my legs and taking the hem of my skirt with me. Gently, he urged me to arch my back so he could pull the dress over my head and toss it to the side. I lay naked beneath him in

nothing but black silk panties and the sheer, thigh-high stockings. He loomed over me, surveying my body with eyes blazing as his hands moved of their own accord to remove his vest and shirt.

The warm light cast shadows in the hard lines of his body, making the squared edges of his pectoral muscles and the v-shaped lines of his abdomen that much more apparent as they moved. I watched with appreciation as he tossed his clothes to the side, unveiling his raw beauty. He trailed both hands lazily over my shoulders, traced his fingertips over the delicate edges of my clavicles, and continued lower, stopped for a moment to cup both breasts and run his thumbs over the tops of my nipples.

“Gorgeous,” Brandon murmured, face alight with desire. He bent down to worship one breast, then the other with his mouth, flicking each nipple lightly with his tongue before seizing it in between his teeth. He bit down, just hard enough to make me lurch. His hands continued their trek down my body as he sucked, pressing a bit more forcefully as he felt around the curves of my waist, the indentations at my hips. There was a sharp, coarse breath when his fingers reached the edges of my stockings.

He stopped his ministrations at my breast, which by that point had me gyrating slightly against his form, and sat back up to admire the thin material on my legs. Large fingers slipped lightly under the lace edges, playing with the fabric with appreciation.

“These,” he said hoarsely. “I like these a lot.”

I smiled in response, my hips arching slightly toward him. Brandon had an agenda; that much was clear. It was all I could do not to push myself up and force him to his back so I could engulf him with the desire I felt raging through me. His fingers tugged on the edges of my stockings and he took his time, sliding each one off and then allowing me to wrap my bare legs around his waist. His hands gripped just a touch more roughly into my thighs, and his breathing drew increasingly uneven.

“I want to be gentle with you, Skylar,” he spoke gruffly, kneading the muscles of my backside as he spoke. “But I’m not sure I can tonight.”

I pulled my legs from his grasp, ignoring his grunt disapproval, and sat up so I was perched on my knees in front of him. I ran my fingers over hard lines of his torso with a sigh, just as I had been longing to do since he’d removed his shirt, then trailed my fingers down to unfasten his pants.

“Take these off,” I commanded quietly. With a quick, blue glance, he followed my order without a word, stripping off his pants, boxer shorts, and socks quickly and efficiently until he sat in front of me, as naked as I was, arms resting over bent knees.

He really was beautiful. He had the taut grace of an athlete, but without the bulk of a bodybuilder. His fitness was naturally made from exercise and genetics, nothing forced, rendering him completely comfortable with his body. Light blond fuzz covered most of his skin, curly and slightly thicker over his chest, legs, and around the base of where his cock

stood out, long and stiff. In the firelight he looked like he had been dipped in gold; a Viking ready to plunder.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked softly.

Although I didn't normally want to take charge when it came to sex, tonight felt different. I wanted to know I could give him the same kind of pleasure, the same kind of release he gave me. After baring such a vulnerable part of myself, now I wanted the control.

So I remained silent, just pushed him gently so that he was now the one his back and I could hover over his big body. I ran my nose lightly across the lines of his stomach, down the muscular angles of his abdomen, and into the hollows of his hipbones, making him jerk slightly. As I started to drift farther down, his hands clasped my shoulders and stopped me.

“Skylar, you don't have to do that,” he said, looking at me down the long, muscular expanse of his body.

I pushed up on my hands so I could see his face. “Don't you like it?”

“I, well, yeah, of course I do. I just don't want you to feel like you have to.”

Quickly, I leaned down and took him whole in my mouth, causing his entire body to jerk in surprise. Just as quickly, I released him, sat back up, and smiled.

“I want to,” I assured him, and bent back down to savor him more carefully, wrapping my hand around the thick base of his cock while I worked.

“Oh, thank Christ,” he breathed. I could feel his body relax beneath my touch while his breathing became increasingly

erratic.

I savored him, nipped slightly at the head for a moment before taking him as far back into my throat as I could manage. I didn't usually like doing this, but it was different with Brandon. The control I had, the subtle changes I could feel with each different movement, the newly rising tension pulsing through his corded muscles: all of these made me even more aroused than I already was.

With my other hand, I grazed a few fingers over his scrotum and trailed below them, past the soft skin of his perineum before trailing even further and tickling the tight edges of his anus. Brandon jerked again, this time in surprise.

"Wha?" he breathed, clearly overcome with what I was doing with my mouth. "Ah!" he cried as I slipped my finger in to massage the back of his prostate. "Jesus...fuck! Skylar, what are you doing?"

I stopped my ministrations to look at him. "You did it to me. Haven't you ever done that before?"

"What? *No!*" Despite his indignation, he couldn't control the slight gyrating his hips were beginning to do of their own accord.

"Doesn't it feel good, though?" I asked.

Quickly, I slipped my finger in and out of my mouth before leaning down to take the tip of his cock back into my mouth. My finger returned to tease at his backside. At the same moment that I fully slipped my digit into his orifice, I sucked. Hard.

“*Shit!*” he yelled, his hips jumping beneath my mouth. “Yes, oh my *fuck*, YES, it does!”

“Good,” I murmured against his swollen head.

I quickened the movement of my finger just a bit more before taking the head in mouth once more. He was close already; I could feel it by the tremors building in his thighs and the now-constant stream of profanity. Just when I thought he was about to lose it, I felt my shoulders roughly seized, and I was yanked up to cover his body with my own, his hard cock sliding easily between the slickness between my thighs. It was all I could do not to open myself up and let him in, completely bare.

“Quick,” he muttered hoarsely, his breath ragged and uneven as he shoved a condom he’d somehow retrieved from the pockets of his crumpled pants into my hands. Equally desperate, I tore it open and rolled it over his thick length, just in time for him to grab my thighs, force himself in, and start pumping wildly from below.

“Oh...fuck!” I cried out, swinging crazily at the sheer depth of his impact.

He drilled upward, his fingers clawing so deeply into my thighs that I was sure I would have bruises in the morning. I couldn’t have cared less. The anticipation combined with the sudden friction caused my reserve to topple over sooner than expected as within a few more harsh thrusts, a sudden orgasm ripped through my entire body with the force of a tidal wave.

“Yes, Skylar, FUCK!” Brandon cried beneath me, joining me as we crested the massive wave of ecstasy together. I collapsed over his chest, our bodies shaking roughly together

as he pumped through the last of his orgasm along with mine. His hands finally released their unforgiving grasp on my legs and drifted up my back, feeling the edges of my vertebrae as we slowly, slowly came down from our high.

“Holy *shit*,” he breathed a few minutes later. His chest rose and fell deeply underneath my cheek.

“I know,” I murmured into the soft smattering of curls.

“That was...Christ. Where did you learn to do that?”

I somehow found the energy to lift myself long enough to look down at his handsome face.

“Do you really want to know?” I asked with a raised brow.

He furrowed his brow, reconsidering the question. “No,” he said definitely. “I do not.”

“Didn’t think so,” I replied as I settled back comfortably onto his chest. His fingers resumed their gentle grazing over my back, and I succumbed to their rhythm, feeling myself being lulled closer and closer to sleep.

“Red?” His voice, small and quiet, interrupted me from drifting off to sleep.

“Yeah?” I whispered hazily.

“You won’t go anywhere, will you?”

I rubbed my nose into the warm hollow in his chest and breathed a sigh of pure contentment. “Where would I go?”

“Nowhere,” he said, and kissed me gently on the top of my head.

Just as gently, he lifted my hips so he could pull out of me. He got rid of the condom and grabbed a blanket from the couch above us. I burrowed into his side and sighed deeply at the feel of the soft knit wool covering our bodies. The last thing I saw before falling into a deep sleep was the reflection of the firelight flickering at the base of the sofa, and the glint of his eyelashes shining bright gold.

~

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Chapter 28

Sometime in the middle of the night I was carried up the stairs to Brandon's bedroom, where I enjoyed another round of drowsy sex before surrendering to sleep again in cloudlike linens of his bed. In the morning, after taking a quick shower together that, of course, resulted in yet another round of decidedly less gentle sex, Brandon lent me a pair of boxer briefs and an undershirt that fell almost to my knees. We ended up in the kitchen sometime after ten, companionably eating a breakfast at the kitchen island that Ana had prepared.

"I want to do something you want to do today," I said after I swallowed a bite of my brioche toast with homemade raspberry jam.

Brandon cocked his head to the right, fork full of eggs suspended in mid-air en route to his mouth. He looked down at the plate, which was loaded with all of Ana's fixings, and then looked up at me.

"Um, I'm pretty happy at the moment," he said. "I'd like to finish my breakfast. Spend some time with my girl. That's...about it. I'm not that hard to please."

"Come on, all we've done is stuff I like to do," I protested despite the warmth in my belly caused by his words. "The symphony—"

"I'm pretty sure I picked that one, Red," he interrupted as he slathered another piece of toast with jam.

"Don't be coy, you goon. You have about the same knowledge of classical music that I do of astrophysics," I said.

“And you took me for pizza because I explicitly wanted something not-fancy. And, of course, there was New York.”

He grinned. “I liked New York. I found out a lot about you there.”

“Exactly!” I cried with exasperation, flinging a piece of egg across the counter.

Brandon watched its progress with an amused expression, then turned back to me. “Your point?”

I set my fork on my plate with some unnecessary force. “You’re impossible, you know that? What do you do for fun? Like, in your spare time?”

He took a bite of his toast and chewed contemplatively, as if my questions created some kind of intense philosophical quandary. He swallowed, opened his mouth as if to speak, and then took another bite. I wanted to strangle him.

“Well, first of all, fun is relative,” he said after he swallowed again. “I like my job, and it’s what I spend most of my time doing. On the rare occasion I have an extra moment, I’m usually up in my shop. Otherwise, my spare time is mostly taken up by a host of other things that aren’t particularly fun.”

“Such as?” When his only answer was a raised eyebrow, I elaborated. “Okay. Run me through the average day for Brandon Sterling.”

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours,” he said with a wink as he used two fingers to drag his phone across the counter. He opened the screen to his calendar and slid it to me.

Colored coded and filled to capacity, the page was an elaborate, rainbow-colored mosaic. I gawked at the sheer

enormity of multi-tasking someone like Brandon had to take on: conference call meetings while en route to London, contract negotiations over dinner, playing squash with a prospective client. Just about seven days a week, the chaos started with a five-thirty AM workout with his trainer and often didn't end until ten at night or later. The only exceptions I saw were the places where a small white box had been carved into the schedule every Friday and Saturday evening bearing just one word: Red.

I handed his phone back. "Didn't you think to ask me first?" I chastised him, though I couldn't keep the silly grin off my face. "Maybe I'm busy on the weekends. I have a schedule too, you know."

He just gave me that delicious half-smile again that made me want to jump him all over again. "I'm being optimistic. Okay, my turn."

I opened up my own calendar and passed it to him. I was almost as disciplined about keeping it up as he—or Margie—was, but it wasn't nearly as full. During the week, my days were a combination of classes, allotted study/reading times, clinic hours, and at least four or five swims a week. I had a separate setting for major test and paper due dates. Brandon thumbed through a few different pages and tapped in something before handing the phone back to me.

"There," he said, returning to his breakfast. "Now you've got me in there too. Hope you don't mind, but I shared your calendar with my assistant too."

"Does Margie really care about my class schedule?" I asked, to which I received another sly wink.

“Margie cares about anything that makes her job easier,” Brandon replied. “And that includes the schedule for the most important person in my life.” He grinned and shoved another big bite of eggs in his mouth.

Woah. Most important person? Was it weird that he was saying something like that so quickly? Was it even weirder that I liked it so much? Unable to hide the blush of pleasure that immediately infused my entire body at the intensity of his words, I looked down at my phone instead of at him.

He’d scheduled a repeating event on the same days and times he’d put “Red” on his calendar. The green boxes were marked “BS.” Immediately distracted, I laughed out loud.

“I guess you get your Fridays after all, huh?” I said as I set my phone back on the counter. I leaned in to kiss him on his wrinkled nose before standing up to clear my empty dishes.

“So you’re probably behind schedule then,” I said as I walked the plate and cup to the sink.

Brandon frowned as he watched me. “Red, just leave it. Ana will take care of that.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Babe, it’s what I pay her for. I didn’t take the weekend off so I could watch you do dishes.”

I left the dishes in the sink and turned to stare at him. “You what?” Images of the mosaic calendar flashed through my mind—I must have swiped right past this weekend’s blank spaces. I knew now what a major undertaking a day off work likely was for him, and how frustrating it probably was for his assistant.

He just grinned. “I’m the boss,” he said, as if it didn’t matter that he’d canceled several appointments with undoubtedly important business partners—people who had probably been waiting weeks or even months for his time. “I haven’t seen you in a week. Yesterday was Valentine’s Day. Sue me.”

“They might,” I joked, but obediently returned to where he sat and allowed myself to be pulled into the shelter of his arms as he nuzzled my hair.

“One night,” he said, “is not enough. Can you take today and tomorrow off too?”

Although the delicious scratch of his nibbles around my jaw made it hard to concentrate, mentally I went over the different work I needed to accomplish over the weekend. I was already ahead on most of my reading, and I didn’t have anything written due until Thursday.

“I think so,” I said between a few increasingly shallow breaths. “I only have a few things to take care of for the clinic, but they can wait until tomorrow.”

“Are they are your place?” he asked, although his words were a bit muddled against the skin below my ear.

I nodded, unable to answer properly as he took my earlobe between his teeth and tugged.

“Great,” he replied, releasing me suddenly from his arms so he could stand up with a wicked grin.

“Hey!” I opened my eyes, ready to complain, only to find him stretching his arms up toward the crown molding

overhead, causing his shirt to rise up above a few tantalizing abdominal muscles. I ogled openly.

“We can swing by there and pick up whatever you need for the weekend,” he said with a wicked grin when he noticed my expression. “So you’ll stay?”

I blinked, brought out of my ab-induced daze. “What? Oh. Um, sure, I guess. Are you sure you want me to?” His house was so pristine, so perfect—as much as I liked it, I was scared to muss anything up.

He scoffed, shaking his head. “Of course. I’d be upset if you didn’t.”

And with a firm but brief kiss, he brought his own plate to the sink, then grabbed his phone to text David to bring the car around.

“Five minutes, gorgeous,” he said with another stamp to my mouth. “Let’s get dressed. And put your coat on. I don’t want anyone else seeing you in that dress but me.”

~

It ended up being a day where I found out more about Brandon’s interests than he’d initially wanted. After stopping by my apartment for a change of clothes and some odds and ends, we ended up messing around Cambridge for the better part of the morning simply because of Brandon’s stubborn resolve not to choose any activity we did, claiming the day was for me, despite the fact that all I wanted to do was something of interest to him. In revenge, I decided to take him puttering around Harvard Square.

Brandon, as I fully suspected, didn’t putter.

“Oh, good,” he said sarcastically as I stopped outside one of my favorite shops. “*Another* used bookstore. I wonder what’s inside.”

“Do you have somewhere else you’d rather be?” I asked in the most saccharine-sweet voice I could muster. “I thought you had cleared your day, Mr. Sterling.”

I nodded to the bookstore clerk as we walked through the entrance toward the back of the store, where I knew they kept their music section. Hunting for vintage music arrangements was one of my favorite past times, and the old bookstores in Cambridge often had the best caches. Brandon followed me back with a loud harrumph. He had been game for the first three shops we’d entered, contending himself by perusing the science fiction and engineering sections, even purchasing a few books he claimed would help with one of his projects on the roof. But after two hours, he had clearly met his limit of browsing bookstores.

“Red,” he said as he came to stand beside me, leaning against the massive wooden bin of sheet music as if in pain. “You’ve made your point. My turn, okay?”

I turned triumphantly. “Ha! Okay, but you’re *not* allowed to choose something you think I’d like. I just dragged you to every bookshop in Harvard Square, so now you have to take me somewhere equally selfish.”

“Thank God,” he breathed, grabbing my hand and dragging me out of the shop so fast I barely had time to lay the music I’d taken out on the counter on my way out.

Once we were back on the street, he called David, who promptly drove around the corner to pick us up.

“You packed your running stuff, right?” he asked as we slid into the backseat of the Mercedes.

I nodded. I figured I’d jog at his place on Sunday instead of swimming my normal two thousand meters.

“Good,” he said. “David, can you take us down to the river?”

Ten minutes later I made my second important discovery about Brandon that day: he was an exercise junkie. After changing in the car, we ended up at popular jogging route that bordered the edge of the Charles River, from Watertown all the way to downtown Boston. We both wore thin workout gear that wasn’t particularly suited to the chilly February air, although I wore Brandon’s sweatshirt over my regular indoor kit of a sports tank and leggings. Brandon jogged in place to keep himself warm given the fact that it was a clear twenty-seven degrees outside and he wore only a t-shirt and track pants.

“This is supposed to be fun?” I asked doubtfully, flapping the sweatshirt sleeves that hung over my hands like limp penguin wings. The hem fell just above my knees. Even with the added layer, I was freezing, and Brandon’s face was starting to resemble a cherry popsicle.

“Nothing feels better than endorphins, gorgeous. Well, except maybe you,” he said with a leer as he picked his knees up again and again. “All right, how far can you go? Two miles okay for you?”

I didn’t run much, but my swimming habit meant I had better endurance than most. I smirked. “How about this: first

man down owes the other a foot massage when we get back tonight.”

“Ooh, a challenge, Ms. Crosby? You sure you know what you’re getting into?”

“You’ve got the legs, babe, but I’ve got the lung capacity,” I smarted as I reached to one side to stretch. “We’ll see how long you last.”

Forty minutes later, I was on my back again on the sheepskin rug, but this time in a decidedly less seductive fashion. I gasped for breath, waiting for the world over me to stop spinning while Brandon chuckled from the couch, removing his shoes before he knelt down to gently remove mine.

“You all right down there, Red?” he asked good-naturedly, all sign of early surliness gone in his current endorphin-fueled state. Plus, he had definitely won the bet.

“Why?” I asked some less sharply than I had intended due to the fact that I was still sucking in air like a wind fan. So much for lung capacity.

“Well, you just fell over like a one of the Three Stooges, and you’re the color of a tomato. I’m just checking in.”

“I’m a redhead,” I snapped from my place on the ground. “Yes, I flush when I’ve exerted myself in any way. Ha fucking ha.”

He leaned back with a smile, holding his hands up in mock surrender. “All right, all right. You seem like you’ve got it under control. You want a water or something? Maybe a B-12 shot? A physical therapist?”

Now that the ache in my side had started to subside, I managed to prop myself up on my elbows to glare at him. “I’m actually in decent shape, you know.”

“Oh, I know. I’ve got firsthand knowledge of it.” From his vantage point, he looked me up and down and gave me a lewd wink.

“No, really,” I insisted, ignoring his jibe and pushing off my hands further so I was fully sitting up. “I swim almost every day. I have the lung capacity of a porpoise.”

Brandon slid off the couch and squatted down next to me. “Sure, babe, sure,” he said as he patted me kindly on the leg. “It’s okay. You can admit you’re just a weakling compared to me.”

“I am *not!*” I squealed. Apparently Brandon wasn’t the only one who was competitive. “There is no way that was only two miles.” I yanked off his giant sweatshirt, which was suddenly stifflingly hot, and hurled it at him.

He only caught it and laughed, barely knocked off balance. “Skylar, relax. I might have hustled you. That was almost four and a half miles, and I run that route twice almost every day. Harvard Square and back just about every morning. Usually a little faster than that, too.”

“Faster than *that?*” I asked, dumbfounded. “What was our time?”

He smirked. “We were running an eight-minute mile for most of it. Actually, I’m pretty impressed you kept up at all.”

I flopped back into the rug, exhausted all over again by the number. No *wonder* I had felt like my sides were going to

split.

“And you do it at that pace *twice*?” I asked as I smacked my palm on my forehead. I knew what he looked like naked. Of *course* he was in killer shape. “Ahh, you *did* hustle me, you big sneaky snake!”

Two big arms slipped under my back and knees. With one graceful movement, Brandon lifted my limp body from the ground and carried me toward the stairs. Too tired to argue, I wrapped my arms around his neck and laid my head on his shoulder.

“Shower time, babe,” he muttered into my ear in a more than suggestive tone. I was too tired to care, just grunted against his muscle.

“And after that,” he said as he tromped up the stairs, “I think you’ll owe me a foot massage.”

Lesson number three learned, I thought to myself as he carried me the rest of the way to dual-person shower in his master suite. Do NOT compete with Brandon Sterling. He played dirty.

~

Chapter 29

It was amazing how quickly I could fall into a rhythm with someone I hadn't actually known for that long. While getting Patrick to commit his time to me with any sort of dependability had literally taken years, Brandon offered what little spare time he had freely. Our schedules meshed surprisingly well (probably because his assistant knew to schedule his appointments around my calendar. Despite the fact that we often didn't get to see each other much more than the weekends and the occasional mid-week dinner, it didn't seem to put any undue stress on our new relationship simply because we were both so busy. It also helped that we got in the habit of texting nearly constantly and talking on the phone almost every night before I fell asleep. It didn't matter what he was doing—especially since Brandon was often occupied with work well past the time I usually went to bed—he always found time to, as he put it, “hear my voice.”

Before I knew it, nearly a month had passed, and I had spent three of the last four entire weekends at his house. Although we usually went out for dinner or some kind of event on Fridays to celebrate several days of not seeing each other, we generally spent the remainder of each weekend lounging around his house, snacking on the foodstuffs Ana left in his fridge and catching up on work when we weren't rolling around in the bedroom. Or the couch. Or his office, come to think of it.

It was actually nice to do nothing together, I thought as we sprawled together on massive sectional in the top floor rec

room. I was comfortably ensconced in one corner of the couch, flipping through some of the files I'd taken home with me for the clinic, while Brandon sat perpendicular to me, keeping my socked feet securely his lap while he went through some things on his laptop. Occasionally he'd reach around absently to squeeze my toes or rub the inside of my arches with his thumbs. A few times (okay, several times) his touch ended with both of us naked and panting on the organic, alpaca-blend carpet, but most of the time it was just a sweet, absent gesture that let me know I wasn't far from his thoughts.

Unshaven and unkempt, Brandon looked about as far from a CEO as possible in a faded t-shirt, a pair of baggy track pants, and his favorite, worn Red Sox hat on backwards. I was just as casual in my favorite yoga pants and my HLS sweatshirt. A rerun of Star Wars was playing on the massive HD screen mounted on the wall, but neither of us were paying much attention. After spending more time with Brandon in his own space, there were other small, seemingly inconsequential yet fascinating things I continued to learn about him. He was a closet comic book fanatic, with a reasonably massive collection stored in his office, and could tell me everything that was wrong with the second three Star Wars movies in terms of plot holes. He had a very mild nut allergy, but almond butter was his favorite food.

I couldn't remember if I'd ever just lounged like this with Patrick—we'd always been out and about in New York together, big as he was on networking. Brandon was busier than most, so it was somewhat relieving to find that he was as content to be a homebody in his downtime as I was. On top of that, he clearly respected my ambition and the time it took me

to accomplish all of my work in pursuit of those goals. He never asked me to delay a reading assignment or push a paper until Monday, nor did he seem upset if I had to stay late at the clinic. Unlike Patrick, who always resented any work that took my attention away from him, Brandon actually seemed happy to observe and support my work ethic.

“Did you want to go out tonight?” he asked, interrupting my train of thought as I leafed through a child custody case file.

“Huh? Oh, I don’t know. Is there anything going on?”

It was as natural a response as I had, one that I’d usually say when Jane asked me the same question on Saturday nights. As she and most of my friends pointed out, I wasn’t terribly social, so I usually depended on her or other classmates to steer me in the direction of the occasional social gathering when I decided to get out of the house.

Brandon frowned. “Like what? I just meant for dinner. Margie mentioned an opera premiere we could go to if you want, but we’d have to get kind of dressed up.” He looked pointedly at my sweats and reached around to clasp my ankle under my pants. “Or we could just shock the hell out of everyone and go like this if you want. Those yoga pants are working pretty good for you.”

I darted a confused look at him and set down my files on my lap. “Don’t you ever just go out?”

“What, like to a bar or something?”

I raised my eyebrows at his oblique response. “Um, yeah. Or a party. Maybe a show. What are your friends doing

tonight, since I haven't met any of them?"

Brandon pressed his lips together and looked away, a slight flush rising through his tan face. "Ummm..."

I set my file as and pulled my feet out of his grasp so I could crawl back across the couch and kneel next to him.

"Mr. Sterling," I asked mockingly. "Don't you have any friends?"

"Yes, I have friends," he retorted a little too strongly. "They're just...I really only see them at functions, you know. Or business meetings. Sometimes at the gym."

"I don't think those qualify as friends," I informed him gently. "I think those are business acquaintances."

"I *have* friends," he insisted as he shut his laptop a little too harshly. "I do."

"Name three," I dared him. "Three people you hang out with randomly, no plans needed, or else who act as a confidante for you."

"Fine," he said, turning toward me to take on the challenge. His arm snaked along the back of the couch, and his finger snagged a stray lock of my hair to twirl as he talked. "No problem. Okay, there's Mark Grove."

"Mark Grove is fifty-seven years old and your business partner," I replied in a clearly disbelieving voice. "He is not your friend. What do you guys do, grab scotches after work and compare notes on guerrilla trial tactics?"

I had seen Mark Grove when he poked his head into the intern room occasionally. He was a spare older man, a

cutthroat securities attorney with a sharp eye that tended to rove around the room like a hawk's and a mouth that was twice as dangerous. We had all sat up a little straight whenever he popped in, worked just a little faster.

“Fine, fine,” Brandon conceded. He drummed his fingers absently on the surface of the sofa, thinking. “Okay, yeah, Kieran! Kieran is definitely my friend. We talk on the phone about stuff that’s not related to work, plus she’s known me since I was a kid.”

I nodded, thinking of some of the conversations I’d overheard at the clinic. “Okay, I’ll give you that. Kieran is your friend. That’s one.”

He ran through a few more names that I quickly disqualified on the basis that he barely knew them, they were only work or charity associates. One he even made up. The joke soon faded when it became clear that Brandon lived in his own sort of bubble, a giant ivory tower of his own making.

“What about your friends from Dorchester?” I asked, trying to help him out. I no longer cared about winning. “You said you see them sometimes...”

“I didn’t really keep in touch that well with any of them.”

“Then what is all this—” I gestured to the bachelor-pad decor surrounding us— “for? Because as comfortable as this couch is, this room doesn’t exactly scream out for the ladies.”

He followed my hand gesture, then shrugged, slightly red-faced again. “I don’t know. I had some buddies from back home, but we sort of had a falling out. It’s...a long story with those guys. I had all of this stuff put in here a really long time

ago when I first bought the place. I should probably have it redone.”

I glanced around at the various paraphernalia that looked like it would be more suited to a sports bar than the top floor of a mansion. It was a little juvenile, I thought, but there was obviously something more here than just wishful thinking.

I turned back to him. “I don’t know. I think anyone’s friends would probably like watching the Sox here.”

“Well, the TV does get a pretty good picture.” He gave me a shy grin that had my heart thrumming in response. “What about your friends, Red? What are they up to tonight, since you’re feeling social? It’s not like I’ve met any of them either.”

I resisted the urge to stick my tongue out at him. Instead I leaned down to smack him a quick kiss on the mouth, quickly pulling away when he tried to turn it into something more. “I don’t know. Let’s see.”

I reached over to snag my phone off the coffee table and snuggled into the crook of his arm while I flipped through my text messages. There weren’t many; I probably had only a few more people that I could call real friends than him.

“Jane says she and her latest hottie are going to trivia night at Cleo’s,” I said, referencing the spot by HLS that so many of the law students frequented. “It’s a bar that—”

“I know what Cleo’s is, Red,” Brandon chafed. “I went to Harvard too, remember?” He leaned back to examine my face in faux horror. “Just how old do you think I am?”

I pulled my face into as serious an expression as I could muster. “I don’t know. It was pre-internet that you were there, right? Isn’t your fiftieth reunion a-coming, grandpa?”

“That’s it!”

Without further admonition, he tackled me into the massive sofa, tickling my sides mercilessly and making me laugh and cry for mercy all at once. Predictably, it ended with me pressed into the soft cushions under his big body while he clasped my face below his and pummeled my mouth with short, vicious kisses that eventually turned into much longer, sensuous ones.

“Mmm,” I hummed into his mouth, luxuriating in the feel of his tongue and his touch. “We don’t have to go out, you know...”

“Don’t tempt me...” he said as he nibbled a path down my neck until he was thwarted by the high collar of my sweatshirt. His hands drifted down my sides until they clasped under my legs, and with a swift movement, he stood up and flipped me over his shoulder.

“Ah!” I yelped as I was suddenly hoofed out of the room and down the stairs to the bedroom.

“Come on, Red,” he said, giving me another quick smack on the butt that made me yelp again. “We’re going against our natural instincts toward hermitry.”

“Hermitry?”

He smirked and pinched me on the waist, causing me to yelp before dropping me on the bed. “Smart mouth,” he murmured with a quick kiss that almost had me begging to

stay in for the night. “It’s a word. Let’s go win trivia night at Cleo’s.”

~

It took a little more time than originally planned, but after a quick romp in the sheets and another quickie in the shower, we finally managed to get ourselves to Cleo’s. Despite my constant teasing, Brandon had flatly refused to take the train, saying that if he was going to spend the evening drinking shitty beer, he could at least ride home drunk in his own car.

“Poor David,” I remarked as the Mercedes pulled away from the curb after dropping us there. “Does he ever get a day off?”

“Every Sunday plus overtime and three weeks vacation a year.” Brandon replied as he straightened the lines of his bomber jacket. He still looked more like a student than a CEO, dressed in stone-washed jeans, a gray Henley shirt that hugged his trim torso in all the right places, and the frayed bill of his Sox hat now curled around his handsome face.

He smiled down at me. “Don’t worry about him, Red. I pay him very well to keep the car up and drive me around for about an hour total most days. The rest of the time David gets to spend reading detective novels and Skyping with his grandkids. He’s pretty happy doing what he does.”

He slung an arm around my shoulders and steered me toward the entrance of the bar.

“All right,” he said. “Into the lion’s den.”

A subterranean place tucked under a few above ground restaurants in an old brick building, Cleo’s was the

quintessential Boston bar, full of dark wood, cheap drinks, and too many Red Sox pennants. The bar had a few faux-Egyptian posters scattered around the dark space, and it was common to hear The Bangles' "Walk Like an Egyptian" blast from the jukebox at least a few times each night, but other than that, the name of the place seemed to be completely separated from its actual vibe.

As we entered the bar, Brandon took an uncharacteristic step behind me while he let me look for my friends. He took my hand in his, and there was a slight dampness on his palm. *Oh*, I realized. Brandon was nervous.

I scanned the bar quickly to find Jane sitting at one of the tall, circular bar tables by herself, on top of which was a pitcher and three pint glasses. She waved at me, and I tugged on Brandon's arm to lead him through the reasonable crowd in the place.

"You're late," she stated bluntly, reaching out to shake Brandon's hand firmly. "Trivia's over. I lost, no thanks to you rabbits, and my date left when he finally figured out I was smarter than him." She shrugged. "But he paid for the beer first, so it's not a total loss. Dumb guys are shit in the sack anyway. So, you must be Brandon. You clean up nice for a corporate bloodsucker."

Brandon took a seat at the table with a raised brow at me. "Is she always like this?"

"I am," Jane confirmed as she poured both of us a pint of whatever cheap beer was in the pitcher. "I'm also here, so you don't need to talk about me like I'm not. Don't worry, it's mostly bravado."

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Brandon replied as he accepted a glass. He took a very long drink until more than half of the glass was emptied. “Thanks for the drink,” he said. “Next round’s on me.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Jane said, raising her glass to clink with ours. “I hear you can afford it.”

“Jane! You said you were going to be nice,” I reprimanded her. I knew that she was only joking, but Brandon didn’t know her like I did.

“Oh, Sky, relax,” she said with a faux-shove to my shoulder. “I’m just teasing him. Big guy can take a joke, can’t you, big guy?”

Brandon smiled grimly and took another very long drink of his beer. When he finished, his glass was empty.

“This helps,” he said dryly as he set the empty glass on the table. “Why don’t I go get that round?”

He stood up to take the pitcher back to the bar to refill, and we both followed his handsome form to the bar until Jane turned to me with eager eyes.

“Oh, girl,” she said. “That’s not just a sundae. That right there is a triple-tiered chocolate cake with velvety ganache filling. He is beyond hot. No wonder you guys had a hard time getting out of the house.”

“Shh!” I hushed her, even with the massive grin on my face. “He’ll hear you!”

“Oh my god, Sky, you are such a prude,” Jane scoffed. “I promise, he’ll like it if he knows you think he’s good in bed.”

I took a sip of my beer, then turned to my friend with my very best “cat who ate the canary” face. “I’ll put it this way: so far, so good. Very good. Phenomenal, in fact. Like, best ever.”

“What’s the best ever?”

Brandon circled around the table and set the new pitcher on the table, pouring himself a drink before he sat next to me. His arm slipped comfortably around to rest his hand at the base of my seat while his thumb gently massaged my lower back. Without even thinking, I leaned into his touch, which had come to feel so natural.

Jane looked at me, then grinned at Brandon. “Skylar was just telling me more about the clinic she’s been doing.”

“Er, yes. I told you about it. Kieran’s a good boss,” I said.

Brandon raised his eyebrows in a way that told me he knew I was full of it, but turned to Jane instead.

“And you two have been roommates since you started HLS, right?” he asked. “Were you friends immediately?”

Jane and I glanced at each other, considering the question.

“Not...not really,” she replied slowly. “I mean, we got along all right, but for the first several months, Sky wasn’t really around much. Aside from the fact that the first year of law school makes you want to kill yourself, she was always in New York. We didn’t really get close until the costume party, right?” She braced herself against the table in that way that indicated a serious story was about to be told. “I convinced her to go with me to this costume party with me the weekend after spring midterms.”

I rolled my eyes and groaned, leaning my head into my hands at the memory. “Oh my god, not that. More like you blackmailed me.”

Brandon said nothing, just watched our interactions with plain interest over the rim of his pint glass. After a few drinks, I was well aware that Jane and I morphed into a female version of Laurel and Hardy. I was curious what he’d think; our particular brand of mind-reading humor wasn’t for everyone.

“I wasn’t going to go,” I continued. “I was heartbroken, you know, because of Patrick—” Jane’s raised eyebrows at the casual drop of that name didn’t go by me unnoticed, but I kept talking: “—but Jane got me shit-faced the night before the party so she could bet I couldn’t recite the Preamble without any mistakes.” I point a finger down on the table for emphasis. “Which, by the way, I know cold. Top of my class in con law, by the way.”

“I don’t know if you know this yet, Brandon, but Raggedy Ann here can’t say no to a bet,” Jane added. “I think it’s a genetic trait.”

Brandon’s eyes flickered over to me at the mention of gambling, but didn’t say anything. He looked back at Jane and gave her his trademark half-smile.

“Yeah, I’ve noticed something like that,” he said as he rubbed my leg sympathetically. “To her misfortune sometimes.”

I stuck my tongue out in response. He had challenged me to a few more runs since our first, and while my legs didn’t

cramp up quite as badly as they did that first time, I still had yet to win any wagers.

“Well, this was definitely one of those times,” Jane continued before tossing back the rest of her beer. She raised a hand to signal to the waitress for another round before continuing.

“So, let me guess. You guys dressed up as...Playboy Bunnies. With ears and tails and the whole nine yards? Am I close?” Since Brandon was well into his third beer, “yards” came out sounding like “yahds”, and I couldn’t help but grin. He sounded both adorable and sexy when his accent came out.

“God, men are such amateurs,” Jane scoffed. “No, that’s only embarrassing because it’s objectifying, and I, my Ken-Doll-looking friend, am way better than that. You see, this was a Dylan party. As in, you had to come dressed up as your favorite Dylan song. Now, did you also happen to know that our favorite red-headed Horowitz can’t stand Bob Dylan?”

“His chord structures are all exactly the same, and he sounds like a tone-deaf asthmatic,” I protested with a slam of my hand on the table. I had had this debate with Jane, a die-hard Dylan fanatic, many a time over the last three years; she knew exactly how to push my buttons. “Sure, he writes some decent verses, but I swear to god, I could play every single one of his early songs at the same exact time, and it would sound like one track.” I turned to Brandon. “Please tell me you’re not a fan. I don’t think I could take it if you were.”

He shrugged. “I’m more of Springsteen guy myself.”

I breathed out an exaggerated sigh of relief. “Whew! I don’t know what I would have done.”

“So because she lost the bet,” Jane continued as she topped off everyone’s glasses, “not only did she have to attend this party that would only feature the musical stylings of a one Mr. Zimmerman, but she also had to dress up with me as a song of my choosing.”

“So which one did you choose?” Brandon asked as he polished off his beer and poured himself new one.

“The worst, most overrated song he ever wrote,” I stated. “Not to mention the worst costume in the world.”

Jane grinned with satisfaction over her beer. “Tambourine Man.”

“What’s wrong with that one?” Brandon asked me. “I think it’s kind of catchy.”

I threw my hands up in the air. “Ugh, where do I begin? First of all, it’s about six...verses...too...long. It has no variance in phrasing. The Byrds did a decent cover, but Dylan’s own changes are terrible. I could go on.”

“She really could,” Jane chimed in.

“So don’t tell me,” Brandon said. “You were the man,” he said, pointing at Jane, “and you had to be the...”

“Tambourine,” I concluded with a groan.

He chuckled, then leaned back to examine me. “How do you even dress up as a tambourine?”

“Oh, it wasn’t actually that hard,” Jane told him, standing up to pantomime the costume with both hand. “I’d been planning it for weeks, you see, and I had the costume ready to go. We cut out two five-foot circles out of cardboard boxes

and painted them white. Then we grabbed the spare cymbals I had from my old drum kit in storage.” She stopped, to inform Brandon quickly, “I tried to be in a band once. It didn’t really take.”

“Sorry to hear that,” he said with a nod, drinking his beer a little more slowly while he waited for the story to continue. “Then what?”

I grinned in spite of myself. Now that the ice had been broken and Jane had stopped heckling him, Brandon was playing the new boyfriend part really well. He was attentive and patient with my friend, asking the right questions at the right times. Maybe it was just the beer, but I didn’t think he was so nervous any more.

“It wasn’t really that hard from there,” Jane said. “A combination of chopsticks and duct tape pretty much took care of the basic engineering. Sky actually followed through on the bet, even though she complained the literally the entire time.”

“Um, you weren’t the one who had to wear it,” I retorted. “I basically couldn’t wear anything besides spandex underneath so I could fit in between the pieces, and then you had to tape it around me. It had a diameter of five feet. I could barely walk in it.” I laid my hands flat on the table, as if it would help me remember.

Brandon chuckled at the image, looking back and forth between us in amusement.

“It wasn’t that bad, you big baby,” Jane said with a pat on my shoulder. “The hardest part was really getting you through the doorways. You did get stuck a few times.”

Brandon snorted. “Really?”

“I also had to hold my pee the entire night because I couldn’t get out of the costume to use the bathroom,” I added with a swig of my beer.

“And had to turn your entire body around to talk to people,” said Jane. “You knocked a lot of things over.”

“And got whacked in the belly every time someone wanted to ‘play’ me. One guy actually tried to grab my tits that way.”

“Oh, plus you got bowled over by people four times!” Jane crowed. “Every time you crashed, the cymbals just made the loudest, most god-awful sound, and everyone would stop and stare. I think the first time someone even turned off the music because everyone thought you were trying to do some kind of performance art.”

By this point, Brandon was laughing so hard he was practically wheezing and tears were starting to shine in the corner of his eyes.

“Shit!” he cried, holding his stomach. “I can’t take it.” But every time he caught his breath, he looked at me and started shaking all over again as he imagined me being knocked over again and again in my tambourine costume.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, get it out,” I said, taking the opportunity to gulp down the rest of my beer. I couldn’t be mad, though. I was actually thrilled my best friend and my boyfriend were getting along so well.

“But in the end, as mad as she was at me, we were friends forever after,” Jane said. She slung a thin arm over my

shoulders and hugged me to her. “There’s a certain loyalty that arises when you have to help your roommate peel off her beer-soaked cardboard outfit and then shield her with said costume so she can pee in a bush in the middle of Harvard Yard because she can’t hold it until you get her home.”

I laid my head on her shoulder affectionately. “There certainly is.”

Brandon sipped his beer as he surveyed us with a reflective smile, blinking meditatively back and forth between our faces. I thought I saw a flash of envy there, but mostly he just chuckled as he recalled the story.

“And on that note,” I said as I pushed myself up from the chair. “The ladies’ room calls, no Jane required. Back in a moment.”

After I made my way to the other side of the bar, I glanced back at our table before turning down the hallway to the bathrooms. Jane and Brandon were leaned over the small round table, her dark head bent towards his cap in deep conversation. I smiled. The night couldn’t be going better if I’d scripted it myself.

~

“So Jane’s...a character.”

After having a few more drinks with us, Jane had begged off to make herself available at the bar. She wasn’t shy about how sexually open she was, and I could tell that Brandon was entertained, if slightly shocked, by her general candor. We had watched with some amusement while she hit on several members of the Harvard crew team before Brandon had leaned

down and whispered a few things in my ear that suddenly make me equally ready to escape on our own.

Now in the car on our way back to the apartment, we were forced to behave in the presence of David, though it was hard not to guide the hand currently massaging my leg a bit higher than was completely decent.

I flipped my gaze toward Brandon, trying to ignore the meditative rhythm of his fingers massaging my inner thigh muscle. “What’d she say?”

He grinned. “Nothing much. Only that she’d castrate me and make kimchi out of my balls if I hurt you.”

I giggled. “Sounds about right. Don’t worry. Like she said, it’s mostly bravado.”

“She sounds like she cares about you.”

I paused for a moment, considering. “Well, I care about her too. She’s...been there, you know?” I sighed. “I’m really going to miss her when she’s gone.”

Brandon took his hand off my thigh and hugged me to his side. “You’re lucky to have a friend like her. That won’t fade when she’s in Chicago.”

I wasn’t so sure. I hoped not. Living at home through college, I hadn’t made a lot of friends at NYU, and the few people I’d kept in touch with from high school weren’t in New York any more. Jane was definitely the closest friend I’d made as an adult, and her quirky presence in my life would be sorely missed once she left to start her job as an ASA back in Illinois.

I almost asked if we should invite Kieran for drinks sometime too. But aside from the fact that it would be

incredibly awkward to hang out with my boss and my boyfriend, I couldn't really imagine Kieran, with her cutthroat personality and sharp exterior, throwing back PBR at Cleo's.

“What happened with you and your friends?” I wondered softly, deciding on a different direction for the conversation. I was lucky to have Jane around to talk with, not to mention my dad and Bubbe when I needed some solace at home. Brandon had his big house...and not much else.

He looked down at me, suddenly very tired. “Why do you want to know?”

I frowned, a little taken aback. He was usually so open with me; he'd already shown me various aspects of his life that had to be painful, and he'd answered any question I had for him, in person or over the phone. He'd been an open book, but now he looked extremely uncomfortable.

“I'm just curious,” I asked. “You seem to avoid the topic, is all.”

He sighed reluctantly. “It's fine. We got into some trouble when I was younger, like a lot of guys do in that neighborhood. There was a fight, the cops got involved, and my friends took the rap for it while I and another guy got off, in part because I was a minor. They never really got over it. It was so long ago, and, well...we didn't exactly keep in touch, okay? I'm pretty sure they wouldn't be interested in hearing from me, and to be honest, I don't really have time for it anyway.”

My heart sank at the dejection in his voice. I was sad for him not because he had lost his childhood buddies—that happened to most people as they matured—but because in his

haste to establish a career for himself, it seemed that he'd never really found adult peers to replace them. It must have been incredibly isolating when he was first starting out, taking jobs next to people at least ten years older than him. Now, he clearly surrounded himself with employees, brought his co-workers into his house to make deals, allowed himself to be cared for by housekeepers and drivers. But he obviously didn't know how to translate any of those connections into meaningful relationships.

I opened my mouth to say something else, but before I could, I was turned to face him. Holding me still with both hands firmly on my shoulders so I had to look at him directly. He had tipped the bill of his cap up so his eyes were out of its shadow.

“Stop,” he said plainly.

I frowned again, confused. “What? I didn't—”

“I know what you're trying to do, Skylar. And what did I already tell you?”

I swallowed.

Brandon waited.

“You don't need to be fixed,” I whispered at last. I couldn't believe it less.

He exhaled, obviously somewhat relieved that I remembered. Oh, I remembered all right. I remembered every, single thing that happened after that too.

His hands dropped from my shoulders down my arms until they reached my hands, which he took into his. Brandon

looked down at our entwined fingers, and pressed delicately into the padded lines of my palms.

“Look at my life,” he said softly. “I went from being a punk kid on a fast track to prison to the man I am now. I want for nothing. Especially now. Especially now that I have you.” He looked up again, and the raw vulnerability in his eyes made my breath catch in the back of my throat. “*Do* I have you, Skylar?”

I didn’t have to think twice. I pulled my hands from his grasp and framed his face with them, stroking my thumbs over the defined, raspy lines of his cheekbones and delicate, fine lines around his eyes. I wouldn’t change a thing. He really was a work of art.

“Of course,” I said emphatically. “Of *course* you do.”

Brandon grunted slightly, then reached over to unclick my seatbelt before hauling me forcefully onto his lap. Before I could protest, his lips were on mine, taking what they wanted and suffocating any remaining speech. I could do nothing but respond as my arms went involuntarily around his neck, clinging to the hair that curled under his cap and yanking his coat collar. His arms were like a vice around my waist; his fingers clawed at the fabric of my shirt and the waistband of my jeans. We couldn’t get close enough.

Suddenly the car pulled over and stopped, and with a discreet cough, David stepped out of the car. Red-faced, I scrambled back to my side.

“Well, that was embarrassing,” I whispered as the side door was opened.

Brandon narrowed his eyes at me and shook his head. “I don’t know what it is about you, Red,” he said as he stepped out of the car.

He took my hand and helped me onto the curb. David nodded at us both, although I noticed he averted his gaze. After he drove the car away, I turned to Brandon.

“You’re the incorrigible one, you know that?”

He wrapped a strong arm around my waist and pulled me tightly against his body, forcing me to stand on my toes.

“You just make me do things I wouldn’t normally ever do,” he said as he leaned in for another kiss. “Like scandalizing my driver.”

A brief peck turned into another, several-minutes of mingling of lips and tongues before he pulled away, breathing heavily.

“Come on, Red,” he said, turning to walk up the steps of his house and yanking me along behind him. “Let’s go inside where I can make you do some things too.”

~

Chapter 30

I was late. It had been a long week of studying and midterms. After completing my hours at the clinic, I had gone for a long swim and ended up falling asleep on my bed when I got home after my shower, a towel still wrapped around my wet hair. Brandon had tickets for some kind of play downtown to celebrate the end of midterms. The exams had forced me to cut short a number of dates and cancel our last weekend together completely. If his eager texts throughout the day were any indication, he was *very* ready to have me to himself again.

I was supposed to meet him at the theater at six forty-five, but I'd woken up at five after six. In record time, I had thrown on one of my many black dresses and a pair of ballet flats, pinned my hair up as best as I could manage, and dashed out the door, coat in hand, to catch the train downtown.

I was just emerging from the Downtown Crossing station with ten minutes left to get to the theater when my phone rang angrily in my purse. Thinking it was Brandon calling to see where I was, I pulled it out.

"I'm almost there, I promise," I said as I walked as quickly as I could over the cracked downtown sidewalks.

"Skylar? Skylar, are you there?"

Bubbe always had a tendency to scream into her phone, convinced that no one could actually hear her through the tiny microphone. This time, however, her voice was laced with a frenzy beyond her usual technophobia.

"I'm here, Bubbe. What's going on? Is everything okay?"

A car horn blared behind me as I jaywalked across Winter Street in order to catch the light and cross Washington. The theater was still three blocks away; I couldn't be bothered to obey traffic laws if I was going to make it before the curtain rose.

"What's that?" I asked again as I skipped around other pedestrians and turned left toward the theater. I hadn't been able to hear her over the traffic. Just over a block away, Brandon's blond waves shone, bright like a beacon among a sea of gray and black overcoats as he scanned for me in the crowd. I waved my hand high, but I was too short for him to spot from this far away.

"It's your father," Bubbe repeated. "He's in the hospital."

The words rang out cold and clear, causing me to stumble and almost fall. My pace forced me to continue walking forward, but I slowed so I could focus on the conversation. "What? Why? What happened?"

"Something happened at the track. I don't exactly know, honey, but he came home the other night with a black eye, you see—"

"And you didn't think to tell me?" I snapped uncharacteristically at my grandmother.

It had been nearly two months since I'd last seen them, but she hadn't mentioned anything like this in the several times we'd talked since then. Ahead, Brandon caught sight of me and waved, pointing at his watch to indicate the late time, but I ignored him as I continued walking slowly. This was too important. Curtain could wait.

“He said it was nothing!” Bubbe insisted. “What was I supposed to do?”

“Okay, so what happened?” I demanded, willing myself to stay calm.

“Well, he stormed out of the house this evening when I confronted him about it, all up in arms about it. Next thing I know, I’m getting a call from some *goy* doctor at Maimonides Hospital, tellin’ me my son is in the ICU with his liver beat to a pulp, half his body broken, and unconscious. I don’t know what happened, Skylar, and that’s the truth.”

At the words ‘ICU’ and “unconscious”, I stopped moving completely, unable to feel sensation in my legs. Brandon watched as I grasped ineffectively for the top of a mailbox, barely able to catch myself before my knees buckled completely.

“Skylar!” he yelled as he started running toward me. But I couldn’t see him. I couldn’t see anything as the world around me blurred.

“Bubbe?” I whimpered into the phone.

“Just come, Skylar,” she was saying. “I don’t know what to do. I’m at the hospital now, and they’re bringing him into surgery, for what, I don’t know. We need you here, *bubbela*, okay? I can’t do this without you.”

Strong hands grasped at me from my elbows, pulling me off the mailbox and into his arms. My head tipped back to find a face furrowed with concern, large blue eyes pools of worry. I breathed a little bit easier. Brandon.

“I’ll be there, Bubbe,” I said with more conviction than I felt, but I could only look at him. “I’m on my way.”

~

“Skylar, I can get us there in an hour if you just let me take you on the plane.”

Brandon had convinced me at least to return to my apartment to pack a few things before leaving for New York. Nothing about my dad’s condition would be improved by getting there an hour earlier, he’d said, and we both assumed I would be there for several days. At least it was spring break. I wouldn’t have to miss classes to help with Dad’s initial recovery.

“That’s really not necessary,” I said as I stuffed another two pairs of jeans into my suitcase.

I looked around my room, which, between my frenzy to leave earlier and my hurry to pack as quickly as possible, looked pretty much like a tornado had gone through my closet and blown everything onto my bed. I tried to think if I had forgotten anything, but came up empty. I clambered onto the bed and sat on my suitcase in order to zip it shut.

“Skylar,” Brandon said with more than a little irritation. He leaned around me to help press the bag down while I zipped. “Please. I’d like to help.”

“You are helping,” I said absently as I fastened the extra buckles. “I closed this bag a lot faster than if you weren’t here.”

He huffed. “Stop it.”

I slid off the small suitcase and started packing my messenger bag with the files I would need while I was gone, along with my computer and cell phone charger. I'd have to miss my regular clinic hours this week, but there was no help for that. I'd do the best I could from Brooklyn.

"It's a misuse of company resources," I said as wrapped up my computer cord. "I'm sorry, but it's ridiculous. You can't go flying your girlfriend home at a moment's notice on a company plane. You and I both know that every spare cent in your company is under a microscope because of the IPO. Don't be stupid."

"It's *my* fucking plane, Skylar!" He grasped my hands in between his and forced me to face him. "I don't know what's going on with your dad, but come on. Let me help however I can."

"It's not an emergency," I bit out, unable to help the welling of tears that came up at the thought of dad in surgery. "He's in the best care now. He'll be fine until the morning—that's what the doctors said. I just need to get there tonight so I'm there when he wakes up. The bus will be fine."

Brandon shook his head and pushed out a frustrated breath. "Jesus Christ, you're stubborn. All right, fine. But if you insist on driving, we'll take my car. David can drive."

"You don't have to come—" I started to protest, but I couldn't get another word out before my mouth covered with a kiss that started out frantic but progressed into something softer, slower, and sadder by the end. When Brandon finished it, he stayed close, his forehead touching mine.

“Yeah, I do,” he said quietly. “Let me be there for you, will you?”

Unable to be kept at bay any longer, tears fell freely down my face. Brandon immediately wrapped both arms securely around my waist, holding me up as I collapsed into his chest.

“Shh, shh,” he crooned gently in my ear, brushing my hair back softly as I cried. “Let it go, baby. I got you.”

He had me. In a moment like this, a moment where the foundation of my life seemed like it was cracking in half, his strength was everything. It was all I could ask for. It was all I could possibly want.

~

We left within the hour. The Mercedes cruised westward out of town, flying stealth among the myriad other travelers on the road. Between the built-in TV monitors in the back of the seats and the gorgeous man who insisted on holding me securely against him for most of the trip, it was a far cry from the Chinatown firetraps I usually took home.

Not that I was particularly enjoying any of it. After it became obvious that I was in no mood to talk, Brandon had been content to let me ride in silence, urging me to relax against his chest and stream a movie via the car’s internet hotspot while he answered emails on his phone. I made it about an hour into the most recent superhero flick before the hypnotic vibration of the drive eventually lulled me to sleep.

“Skylar. Baby, we’re here.”

I sat up in rush, yanked out of a dream in which I had been prosecuting Tony Stark for reckless endangerment. Brandon

set a hand on my shoulder and nodded toward the bright lights of Maimonides Hospital. I blinked and shoved a hand through my hair before I checked my watch. It was just after ten-thirty. David had made good time.

“You all right, babe?” Brandon asked as his strong fingers worked to loosen the kinks in my neck from sleeping on his lap.

I leaned gratefully into his touch. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m good.”

David opened the door and I reluctantly scooted away to exit the car. Brandon followed, and then turned to his driver.

“Pick us up sometime after dinner. I’ll let you know what room we’re in, all right?” He turned back to me. “What sounds good?”

I shrugged. As the reality of the situation set in again, my appetite completely vanished. I couldn’t have cared less about eating. I just wanted to see my dad.

Brandon muttered something else to David, who nodded and walked back around to the driver’s side of the car. I felt a hand at my back as Brandon guided me toward the entrance of the hospital. I hadn’t been able to contact since Bubbe had turned off her cell phone again—or forgotten to charge it, most likely—so I had no clue about my dad’s current state. As we approached the information desk, I was terrified of what I might find out.

We were directed to a recovery ward in the ICU, where I had to wait outside for the on-call doctor to arrive. Brandon left briefly to get me some tea from the general waiting area, then returned to sit with me on the cold leather bench.

“Skylar?” he asked as he slid his arm around my back.

I took a sip of the tea. It was terrible: cheap Lipton’s garbage that tasted more like hospital tap water than anything else.

“Skylar,” Brandon tried again, finally getting me to look up at him. “I have to ask. Who did this to your dad?”

I swallowed. I knew I was going to have to answer this question eventually; I was actually surprised he’d been patient enough to wait nearly four hours. Brandon had overheard the one conversations I’d had with Bubbe on the way down; he had undoubtedly gathered that Dad’s injuries weren’t just by accident.

I sighed. This wasn’t the kind of thing a man like Brandon Sterling wanted to be involved with—a family trapped by a gambling addiction and an obligation to small-time mobsters. This was my fault. I’d selfishly ignored what was going on with my dad for the last two months. I’d wanted to live in the fantasy of being with a man like Brandon for just a little bit longer. If I didn’t know anything, there was nothing to tell. And if I didn’t tell him anything, Brandon wouldn’t feel obligated to get involved (since I suspected that was just the kind of guy he was). All he needed was for Victor Messina to figure out my connection to him and the two-bit thug would be asking for a lot more than just what my father owed.

But now my dad was paying an immense price for my self-imposed ignorance. Now I couldn’t lie.

“My dad’s...in trouble,” I said slowly after taking another large sip of my tea. I sighed. “He likes the track too much. He

was able to stay away for the last few years, but it looks like he fell off the wagon. Really hard.”

Brandon grimaced knowingly and nodded with obvious understanding. “Ah. So he owes some heavies, and they fucked him up for it.”

I nodded. Unable to meet his eyes, I resorted to taking another sip of my terrible tea. “Looks that way. I don’t think I should tell you much more.”

Brandon frowned. “No, you should tell me everything.”

“*No*,” I insisted vehemently. “You know what I mean. You *really* shouldn’t know any more.”

His eyes widened as the underlying meaning of my words hit home. He twisted his mouth around for a moment, as if weighing the pros and cons of pressing the matter. Then he brightened.

“Give me a dollar,” he said. “You could hire me, and then we’ll have attorney-client privilege.”

I smiled wryly. “Pretty sure defending me would qualify as attorney misconduct, Mr. Sterling.”

“Please. No one in Massachusetts has ever been disbarred for sleeping with clients. If that were the case, there would be no more public defenders in the Tri-State area.”

I snorted. “Well, regardless, I don’t want you anywhere near this,” I insisted. “These guys are bad news, and the last thing you need in your life is a scandal, especially with your IPO on the line.”

Brandon started arguing against my logic, but was interrupted by the squeaks of rubber soles on tile that signaled the arrival of the doctor. We both stood up from the bench at her approach.

“I mean it,” I told him, then stood to greet the doctor.

“Ms. Crosby?” she asked with a kind smile. “I’m Dr. Carraway.”

I nodded. “Hi, nice to meet you. This is my—”

“Boyfriend,” Brandon cut in. “Brandon Sterling.”

I rolled my eyes at his alpha-behavior, even if I did like him introducing himself that way. The doctor raised her eyebrows briefly in recognition of the name. Great, all we needed was my dad’s doctor to be a *Forbes* magazine fangirl.

Luckily, I didn’t have to worry.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Sterling, but visiting hours are over. Only immediate family is allowed right now. You’ll have to wait here or in the lobby,” said Dr. Carraway firmly. As Brandon started to argue with her, she held up a small hand and shook her head. “I’m sorry. Hospital rules. No exceptions.”

I turned to Brandon and tiptoed up to kiss him on the cheek. “It’s fine. You can go to the hotel. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Absolutely not. I’ll wait for you here—” he started to protest again, but I stopped him with a hand on his shoulder and shook my head firmly.

“I don’t know how long I’m going to be, and I don’t want to feel rushed into leaving him,” I said. “Please go. I’ll call

you when I'm done, okay?"

A few light creases deepened substantially on his forehead as he glanced between me and the doctor, clearly frustrated by his inability to step in and fix everything. Finally, he sighed and gave up.

"All right," he said. He leaned down to give me a quick but thorough kiss. "Call me as soon as you're ready to go. I'll have David come get you."

"No, that's not necessary. I'll need to go home anyway and take care of Bubbe, and I'm not making David schlep me all the way to Flatbush. He doesn't know the area, and he'll get lost on the way back. The last thing you need is for your driver to be carjacked."

He scowled. "I don't want you taking the train home by yourself this late at night."

"I'll take a cab," I conceded.

"Skylar."

"Brandon. I promise. Bye."

He examined me for a moment, his eyebrows pushed together in concentration. Finally, he brushed his knuckles lightly over my cheek and kissed me lightly on the forehead. "All right. But call me when you're home, all right?"

I watched him walk down the hallway toward the exit until Dr. Carraway cleared her throat behind me. I turned and allowed her to walk me into the ICU.

Dad lay in a room full of curtained off hospital beds, each of them bearing people in various degrees of acute pain or

recovery following surgery. All of them were attached to several different machines and IV bags, and a constant stream of beeps and hums echoed throughout the large room. I couldn't imagine how anyone could sleep with such a racket, but by some miracle, Dad and most of the other patients appeared to be completely out. It was good thing too, because at the sight of him, I choked back a deep, immediate sob.

His face was swollen and purple, with an ugly cut across one eye and bandages over his nose that would have made him unrecognizable if it hadn't been for the characteristically floppy hair hanging limply over his distorted features. His left hand was dressed heavily in gauze and splints, while the rest of him lay prostrate, propped up on various pillows for maximum comfort.

"We're keeping him sedated and have given him enough medication to manage the pain," Dr. Carraway informed me.

"Will he be okay?" I asked quietly. "Just give it to me straight, please. I drove a long way to be here tonight."

Dr. Carraway looked at me frankly. "Well, essentially your dad got the shit beat out of him, if you'll excuse my French."

I exhaled and smiled grimly. I was relieved to have a doctor who was willing to be honest.

"Did—did he say how it happened?" I asked, unable to pull my horrified gaze away from Dad's maimed form.

The doctor shook her head. "No. I suspect he's scared of whoever did it. He had six broken ribs, a fractured nose, a fairly serious liver laceration, and his hand was essentially crushed. Three second, third, and fourth metacarpals with

multiple fractures, and two phalanges as well. I've seen injuries like these before, and they require a bit more... equipment...than just a few punches to the gut.”

Immediately all I imagined Dad bloodied and frail on the ground while some faceless goon went at him with a bat. My throat felt like it was going to close in. Dr. Carraway put a kind hand on my shoulder, although I could tell she wasn't the kind of person who generally offered much in the way of comfort. That was okay. Her job was to take care of my dad, not me.

I swallowed down my nausea and continued to listen to his prognosis. The emergency surgery to repair his liver was successful, she said, but he would need another to repair the bones in his hand as soon as he could handle it. She expected that would be in another two or three days, as soon as the biggest dangers from the liver repair had passed. As long as everything went all right, he would be out of the ICU tomorrow, but he'd have to stay in the hospital for observation until the second surgery.

“It's not as bad as he looks,” she said kindly. “The hand is really the worst part now, and it's not life-threatening.”

That wasn't saying much. She didn't know how important his hands were to him.

“When will he wake up?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Probably not until tomorrow morning, I'd hope. We've got staff here 24-7 to monitor him, but it's best that he sleeps. You could go home and take care of your grandmother. She seemed like she needs a steady hand.”

I grimaced. Undoubtedly Bubbe had been giving the hospital staff a major headache while Dad was in surgery.

“All right,” I said. I reached out to touch Dad’s unmarred hand lightly. He stirred and moaned a little; I drew away immediately, and followed Dr. Carraway back into the hall, where we could talk without disturbing the sleeping patients.

“What about his hand?” I asked. “Will he...will he regain full function?”

Dr. Carraway pressed her lips together sympathetically. “Your grandmother mentioned that he plays piano. To be honest, that’s a question for the hand surgeon, Dr. Bennett, who will be here tomorrow morning. He’s great—I know he specializes in some of the newer techniques for metacarpal repair. But I wouldn’t expect a miracle.”

~

I stepped out of the hospital with my phone, ready to call Brandon to let him know I was on my way home. But suddenly all I could see was the shadowy face of my father’s attacker, and I knew what I had to do. I flipped through did a quick search and pressed dial.

“Nick?” I asked as the phone was answered on the first ring. “It’s Skylar. Yeah, I’m at the hospital now. Is he there tonight?”

Nick answered me quickly, but I ignored the rest of his admonitions.

“All right,” I replied. “I get it. Just tell him...I’ll be there on Monday night. Tell him I’ll have what he wants.”

I pressed the off switch, and stepped out into the street to hail a cab. My stomach had flipped about four times and my hands were shaking. Even so, for the first time all night I felt a sense that I could fix things, even a little.

~

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Chapter 31

The next morning, I woke up to the smell of pancakes. I opened my eyes and squinted in the bright sunlight shining through the cracks of the blinds in my attic room. A dust-speckled ray of light speared the dark interior of my room, landing directly on my face. I sat up, turned on my bedside lamp, and shoved my glasses over my nose.

A glance down at my old alarm clock informed me that it was nine o'clock. I groaned. It was well past three by the time I'd finally managed to fall asleep last night, my mind addled with various imaginings of Dad's accident that had managed to make their way into my interrupted dreams.

Slowly, I pushed my blankets aside and slipped my feet into my worn moccasin slippers. My suitcase was still in the back of Brandon's car, and everything I still had left at the house were all remnants from high school: the Care Bear-covered pajama pants were a Christmas gag gift, my oversized Snoopy t-shirt a souvenir from a family trip to Atlantic city. I shoved my head through a ratty green hoodie with a peeling Department of Sanitation logo across the front and stepped carefully down the rickety stairs from my attic room.

As I walked down the second flight to the main floor, the smell of pancakes was even stronger, and I heard the sound of Bubbe's laughter wafting up with it. Laughter? The last time I'd spoken with her, she'd been close to hysterical. When I'd crept into the house last night, sometime after one, she'd been asleep in her favorite armchair, the TV blaring with old episodes of *This Old House*. I'd covered her with a blanket

and headed upstairs to spend the rest of the night in my own private purgatory.

I turned the corner into the linoleum-covered kitchen and found Brandon sitting at the kitchen table, long legs spread comfortably in front of him while he sipped a cup of coffee. He wore his usual jeans and a navy Henley, but still managed to look runway-ready—a far cry from my sweatshirt and ratty pajamas.

He turned and brightened visibly when he saw me standing in the doorway.

“Morning, Sleeping Beauty,” he said with a show-stopping smile. “I was just about to sneak upstairs and drag you out of bed. Nice get-up, by the way.”

He nodded up and down at my ragtag ensemble, and I glanced down before shoving a hand through my uncombed hair.

“Whatever” I mumbled as I trudged over to where Bubbe stood at the stove and laid my head on her small shoulder. “Morning, Bubs. Is there hot water for tea?”

“It’ll be ready in a minute, *bubbela*. I started it when I heard you coming down.”

She flipped a pancake before smiling at me. From far away, you wouldn’t have known she’d spent the last twenty-four hours worried sick about her son, but up close the bags under her eyes were more pronounced, and her normally impervious helmet of hair had multiple strands out of place. More noticeable was the absence of commentary about my

appearance, noisy footsteps, or any other improvements she felt I should make.

I kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks, Bubbe. You’re the best.”

I walked back over to the table and took a seat across from Brandon, who was watching me curiously over his cup full of my grandmother’s ridiculously strong coffee.

“When did you get here?” I asked quietly as he reached over to squeeze my hand. “I thought you were staying at a hotel.”

“I did. But when I didn’t hear from you last night, I got worried, so I came over first thing. Your grandmother was up and let me in.”

“He came over like a gentleman to check on your father and offer help,” Bubbe added as she flipped another pancake onto the plate already stacked with them on the counter. A skillet loaded with scrambled eggs sizzled as she stirred them around. “I don’t understand why you didn’t offer to let him stay here. We’re not animals, Skylar. We have a guest room.”

She turned around to look knowingly at Brandon, as if the sagging double bed shoved into the corner of a room mostly dedicated to storing Dad’s instruments demonstrated something critical about our wealth. It wouldn’t have taken her long to figure out that Brandon had money. Through the window I could see David’s silhouette in the Mercedes, parked in front of the chain-linked fence; even in his casual attire, Brandon looked like he had walked out of a fashion spread, and the white gold of his watchband glinted, untarnished, in the sunlight. I shook my head. The last thing I needed was for

Bubbe to get dollar signs in her eyes. I'd be getting engagement tips every day for the next month.

"I'll keep that in mind for next time, Mrs. Crosby. I'm sure your guest room is a lot more comfortable than the stiff beds at the Waldorf," Brandon said as he hid a smile behind the rim of his coffee cup.

"Ooh, the Waldorf!"

I shot a look to Brandon as Bubbe hummed with approval. She walked over with the plate of pancakes and a large bowl of eggs. I hopped up from my chair when the kettle on the stove began to whistle.

"Any word on Dad this morning?" I asked as I poured the water into my mug and started the process of doctoring my tea.

Bubbe took her seat at the table and began serving everyone monstrous portions, starting with Brandon. "They said he's awake and should be ready to get out of that place tomorrow. Are you going to visit him today?"

I nodded as I took my seat at the table. Brandon slid a warm hand over my knee in greeting, but didn't stop shoveling eggs into his mouth. Bubbe watched him with satisfaction; the guy could really eat.

"Yes, I am," I said to her. "He still hasn't seen me. Plus, I also want to find out what the prognosis is for his hand."

"Oy, his poor hand," Bubbe said as she clasped her own palm to her cheek. "Your poor father—I don't know what he'll do if it doesn't heal right, if he can't play anymore. Music his

one real joy, you see,” she informed Brandon, who nodded, mouth full.

“I think the bigger question is when he can get himself into some kind of therapy,” I replied dryly. Truthfully, the thought of Dad unable to play anymore cut me so deep I couldn’t yet bear to consider the idea. Not to mention I was more concerned with his immediate circumstances.

“Therapy? For what?” Bubbe asked, eyes suddenly darting back to Brandon.

I sighed. I had a feeling she would fight this; Bubbe was not the type who would ever want to believe her beloved son needed psychiatric help. She’d practically ignored it the first time around, when I’d been there to make sure he attended his sessions. This time, however, I’d need her on board in my absence.

“Bubbe, Dad’s sick,” I said gently, laying a hand on her small, wrinkled one. “He needs help.”

“Skylar, we have company,” she said, looking back at Brandon with a nervous smile.

Brandon glanced between us and swallowed his last bite of eggs. Then he stood up. “I’m going to go bring a plate out to David,” he said with a kind look to me. He filled up his plate again and ducked out of the room before Bubbe could protest or even offer extra cutlery.

I turned back to my grandmother, who was now uncharacteristically quiet, focusing instead on folding and refolding her napkin.

“This stuff with Dad and Grandad,” I said as lightly as I could, “it’s not their fault. It’s an addiction, Bubbe, and we can help Dad before he gets himself killed from it.”

A long tear fell down her otherwise stalwart face. She swiped it away with a manicured finger. Several of her nails were uncharacteristically chipped, and a few even looked like they had been bitten down completely. She must have had as terrible a night as I had—maybe worse.

I took the hand in mine and squeezed, and she finally looked up.

“I don’t...I can’t...what will people think?” she asked. Her voice was so weak, I wanted to pull her to me and tell her it didn’t matter, that Dad would be fine no matter what. But the truth was, we didn’t know how he would be. Even after everything was healed, we didn’t know how deep he was in, or what kind of psychological damage the possible loss of his hand—his livelihood—would be.

“I don’t know, Bubbe,” I said. “But I think it will be better than if he’s dead, don’t you?”

I knew she was thinking of Grandad, and it was maybe a dirty trick for me to even suggest the same fate for her son. But we couldn’t afford to be ostriches with our heads in the sand. Dad needed help, and we needed to be strong enough to make sure he got it.

She sat there for a moment longer, wiping away a few more errant tears with one hand, gripping mine with the other. Then, at last, she dropped my hand and folded both of hers in her lap. She looked straight at me, her dark brown eyes clear and focused.

“You say these doctors, this therapy, it will help him? Better than last time?”

I cocked my head in sympathy. “It’s better than nothing, right?”

She considered my words for a moment. Then she nodded. “All right, then. You say he needs to go? I’ll make sure he goes. That’s that.”

I moved to pat her on the shoulder, but she waved my hand away, instead picking up her fork and taking a bite of her breakfast with finality. That was thing about Bubbe—once her decisions were made, there was no more room for talking. Just doing.

~

After breakfast, Brandon snuck upstairs to help me get dressed while Bubbe watched her morning programs. He had to duck to enter the small doorway to my room, but once inside he took a comfortable seat on my unmade bed and looked around curiously.

“You’re like Cinderella,” he commented. “Living in the attic.”

I looked around at the exposed rafters and shrugged. “I moved up here when I was a teenager. Privacy.”

“I can imagine needing that with your grandmother in the house,” Brandon agreed.

He kicked his shoes off and sat back on the bed, watching me with appreciation as I stripped off my pajamas and yanked a pair of jeans and t-shirt from my duffel. Just as I was starting

to tug the jeans over my legs, my arm was seized and I found myself pulled onto the bed atop Brandon's large, warm body.

"Come here," he said softly as he wrapped me close in his arms and tucked my head into the soft knit fabric over his chest. With his touch, I felt the tension in my body lessen a bit as I breathed in his clean, comforting scent. One of his hands splayed against the small of my naked back while the other drifted up to brush stray hairs out of my face. After a moment, he tipped my head up so he could see me clearly.

"How are you doing?" he asked softly. "I was worried about you last night."

I gulped. "I'm sorry. I just...I should have let you know I was on my way. I felt so overwhelmed; I forgot until I got home." I had ended up sending a quick text before I'd gone to sleep, but I'd collapsed under my covers before receiving his reply.

He didn't say anything, just kissed me softly on the forehead and continued to stroke my hair. His movements were gentle, clearly without any kind of ulterior motive despite the fact that I was laying in his arms in next to nothing. And it should have been exactly what I wanted after the previous harrowing night. But instead, the mild restlessness that had been present since I woke up was blooming into something more potent. The rhythmic swell of his chest seemed less comforting and more tempting, as was the intoxicating combination of his shampoo and personal scent. Suddenly, I absolutely no desire just to be held any longer.

My hands, as if of their own accord, found the hem of his shirt and slid beneath it to find the flat expanse of his belly. I

outlined trim lines of his abdominal muscles, humming with pleasure while I pressed my face into his neck, eager to inhale even more of him. When my mouth opened against the delicate skin over his pulse, he inhaled, the hand at my back suddenly tense.

“Skylar,” he rumbled. His vocal cords vibrated deliciously against my lips.

“What?” I mumbled against his stubble. My tongue snaked out to play lightly against his skin, and he shivered.

“You...erg...you don’t need to do this...ah!” he jumped slightly as my lips sucked more definitely at his jaw. “I just mean...that’s not what I came here for.”

I pressed one hand into the mattress next to his face and pushed up so I could look over him.

“Babe?” I asked. I traced one finger down his chest and toyed with the three buttons that closed the collar of his Henley.

Brandon watched me, his eyes wide and unsure. “Yeah?”

“I don’t want to be sad right now,” I stated as I unfastened the top button and moved on to the second. “Right now, I just want to be with you. So can we just mess around and pretend for a few minutes like I don’t have a shit day ahead of me?”

I finished with the third button and pulled his collar open so I could slide my hand under the waffled fabric to feel the expanse of his chest. The hand at my back tightened just a bit more, and pressed me into his side. I leaned in to kiss him gently on either side of his mouth, and he lay stock-still beneath my touch, somehow paralyzed in the moment.

“Please?” I asked, my mouth hovering just slightly over his. “Can you help me?”

The word seemed to bring him out of whatever philosophical argument he’d been having with himself. His other hand threaded its fingers roughly through my messy locks and pulled me down, showing me just how thoroughly he could help me with a vigorous kiss.

“I feel like I’m just a kid again, sneaking into the neighbor girl’s bedroom so we could neck,” he said a few moments later before kissing me again.

I splayed over his body, eager to feel as much of him as possible beneath me. “Did you do that with a lot of neighbor girls?” I could just imagine Brandon, tall and handsome, if a little gawky, flashing his pearly whites at a girl for an invitation into her bedroom. “Take this off.” I yanked at the hem of his Henley, and he obliged, allow me to pull it over his head so I could look at the smooth, sculpted expanse of his torso.

“Maybe a few,” he said as he pulled me close again for another thorough kiss. “What about you? Any boys climb in through the attic window?”

I smiled against his warm cheek. “Not really. Tommy Leibowitz tried once, but he broke the branch of the oak tree trying to scoot into my window. No one else could get in after that.”

“Well, Tommy Leibowitz ain’t got nothin’ on me, baby,” Brandon growled. “Not when it comes to you.”

His fingers gripped my mass of hair while his other hand drifted down to clench tightly around my ass and press me into his obvious erection. A few fingers slipped under the edge of my underwear so he could grab my cheek fully, causing low moan to rise in the back of my throat.

My breath caught in my chest, and suddenly I couldn't that my grandmother was only a few flights of stairs away from my unlocked door. In fact, the idea actually made the whole thing that much hotter. I couldn't get him naked fast enough.

"Off," I mumbled into his mouth, tearing at the buttons of his jeans below me.

He growled and lifted his legs—with me on them—just enough to scoot off his jeans and boxers so that his erect penis lay heavy over his stomach. His fingers slid into the edges of my underwear and pulled them down my legs. I kicked them the rest of the way off and resumed my place straddling him, my hair falling around our heads in a thick reddish canopy.

One arm encircled my waist in an unforgiving grip, the other around my neck as he yanked me down to meet his hungry mouth.

"Fuck, Skylar," he growled in between the torrent of arduous kisses. "Fuck!"

I could feel the velvety length of his rubbing against me, the friction of his long shaft tickling the outer edges of my entrance and making me wetter by the second. I rolled my hips, helping the movement along. It was a dangerous game we were playing, but he felt so, so good there. I absolutely ached to have him inside me.

I rolled my hips again, and the tip of him managed to sneak in, catching us by surprise when I lost my balance and took him completely and unexpectedly. I gasped at the sudden, immediate penetration. Brandon's big body arched at the contact and he cursed: "Fuck!"

We stared at each other, both of us shocked, dumbfounded, and undeniably turned on, if the involuntary movements of both of our hips was any indication. I swallowed, and before I could lose myself in the movements, I pushed off him and hopped down to the floor.

"Ah!" he yelled, almost as if in pain.

"Condom," I muttered, looking frantically around as I tried to remember if I had any here.

"My jeans pocket. Goddamn it, *hurry!*"

Frantically I rifled through his pants until I came across a strip of condoms. I tore one off and practically jumped back onto him before ripping the package open and sliding it on as quickly as I could. Brandon grabbed my hips and shoved me down on top of him, forcing me to take his throbbing length to the hilt. He grabbed my hand and held it to my clitoris, just above where our flesh met.

"Touch yourself," he ordered gruffly. His hips began to move beneath me, causing me to moan. Barely able to think, my mind so clouded with desire, I started to move my fingers, massaging the tender nub of my clitoris while I reveled in the fullness of having him inside me. There was really nothing better.

“Did you like that, baby?” he growled as he pumped into me from below, his hands vices around my hipbones. “Did you like how I felt in you, with nothing on?”

I couldn't answer, just undulated down to meet his movements, only able to feel the long length of him spearing me to my core.

“Ummm,” I moaned, just as he tugged me down to his eager mouth.

His hands were like steel while his hips rocked mercilessly into me, against and again and again. My fingers, trapped between our undulating bodies, worked ferociously in time to his harsh rhythm.

“That's how it's meant to be, baby,” he mumbled into my mouth. “Just you and me, Skylar. Nothing between us.”

Brandon slowed his movements, causing me to sit back up and look down at him in angst. Both hands released their hold on my legs and slid up to tug the cups of my bra below my breasts. His deft fingers found my nipples and began to tug them lightly, pinching them in a way that sent pulses of need straight to my core, straight to that place where his body met my own. His hips rolled agonizingly slowly, forcing me to feel every last inch of him as he created that delicious friction just inside me. My G-spot. God, the shape of him was made for it—there was no other explanation as to how he was somehow able to make me come better than I could ever do for myself. I pressed harder on my clit, just atop where the feeling was building, doubling up on pleasure as I closed my eyes to just feel it.

“One day you’re going to feel me all the way, baby,” Brandon said in between shattered breaths as he made another agonizing roll with his hips. “You’re going to feel me come in you, deep inside you, fill you up until you just. Can’t. Take. Any. More.”

He matched his thrusts to his words, each one stronger than the last as his words finally forced me to come undone.

“Fuck!” I cried as I began to shake uncontrollably. “Ah!”

His hands released my aching breasts, and one rose to grasp me around the neck, pulling me down into his vibrating body as he rolled out our orgasms together. We shook desperately in each other’s arms, stricken with pleasure until we both lay limp and lifeless, our only movement the rise and fall of his chest as he fought to catch his breath.

Finally, he tilted my head up to his and laid a soft, but thorough kiss on my lips.

“That was...”

“Intense,” he finished. One hand rose to stroke the top of my head, but fell lifelessly against the mattress. “I’ve...fuck. I’ve never wanted to do that so badly. Shit, Skylar, we almost —”

“I know,” I murmured into the soft hair on his chest. “I know.”

“I’m sorry.”

We lay silently, recovering as the reality of what had just happened gradually dawned on us both. My body stiffened, and his hands gripped my arms, holding me in place.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I didn’t come. Wasn’t even close.”

“I’m on the pill,” I said automatically into his chest. The thump of his heartbeat rose clearly against my cheek. It pounded loudly, as sturdy as he was. “That’s not what I was thinking about.”

“Oh. Well, I’m clean, I promise. I was tested not too long ago. I’ll show you if you want—”

“That’s fine,” I interrupted, not yet ready to lose the hazy post-coital warmth I was still basking in. “I’m clean too. I had a physical last month, and I was tested then.”

“So we’re good,” he said as his big arms slipping around my bare back.

The contrast of his warm skin against the cool air was welcoming, and my body melted further into him. I sighed with pure contentment. “Yeah. We’re good.”

“This room feels like you,” he commented a few blissful moments later.

“What, like in me?” My crude joke earned me a mild smack on the backside.

“No, perv,” he said. “Just in general. I didn’t see you as a madwoman in the attic, but other than the creepy rafters, it’s pretty much like I expected. The dollhouse furniture and the posters. It’s such a damn girl’s room.”

I returned his light-hearted smack, but I ended up hitting more mattress than man. In my sex-haze, though, I didn’t really care if he thought if my teenage bedroom was so typical.

“What did yours look like?” I grumbled into his cheek.

“At the Petersens’, the group home, or in Dorchester?” His body stiffened slightly under me, and the arms that had drifted down my back tightened to prevent me from sitting up to look at him. Shit.

“Um...”

“I don’t really remember the room at my mom’s place,” he said quietly. I lay perfectly still, urging him on silently. “But Ray and Susan have a small house up in Somerville. Nothing special, just a little colonial. My room was on the second floor and overlooked the barbecue in the backyard. They gave me a bunch of Ray’s old furniture from his grad school days, and I remember when Susan took me down to Newbury Comics to pick out posters.”

I wanted so badly to sit up to see his face while he was talking, but his arms continued to hold me still.

“She made me choose three,” he continued, “and when she realized I’d never listened to anything other than Kieran’s radio downstairs, she ended up buying me a cassette player and about twenty of her favorite albums.” His chest shook slightly under my cheek with laughter. “I thought this lady was crazy, but I didn’t stop her. No one had ever done anything like that for me before.”

“Did you like her picks?” I asked curiously. I hadn’t met Susan yet, but now I really wanted to. Her kindness was touching.

“Some of them. I wasn’t really into Carly Simon, but I did like her Springsteen choices. I used to listen to *The River* over and over again while I was studying. Ray hated it, but Susan made him let me keep it on. Everyone else I knew back then

was crazy about, I don't know, Marky Mark or some shit like that, but I just wanted to listen to the Boss.”

I didn't say anything, just imagined a twelve-year-old Brandon in his small room, working hard at his new-old desk, trying to impress his foster parents even while he was at odds with them. I wondered if he was tall at that age too, or if he was still small enough that only his toes touched the floor. “That explains the Springsteen preference. You sound like a model ward. I can't imagine why Ray would have had such a problem.”

Brandon's chest rumbled with a low chuckle beneath me. “Well, I wasn't a bookworm most of the time. I liked school, but I also liked sneaking out to meet my friends back home. I got into more than enough trouble to merit Ray's disappointment.”

“Well, you don't now,” I said grumpily, recalling Ray's stoic countenance toward his foster son. I didn't care how many things he had done for Brandon in the past—I hated the cold manner in which he treated a man who clearly thought the world of him.

“Maybe.” Before I could pursue the cryptic response, Brandon swiftly turned the conversation back to me. “I wouldn't have pegged you for a Smiths fan—that's more for old people like me. I was thinking more like Dashboard Confessional.”

Atop him I shrugged. “He ripped off Morrissey anyway. Besides, what The Smiths lack in composition, they make up with polish and ironic lyrics.”

““To die by your side is such a heavenly way to die’?”

I nuzzled deeper into the hollow of his clavicle. “Something like that. So is that all you like about my house? My old concert posters and flea market furniture? It’s basically a garage sale compared to your place.”

The fingers of one of Brandon’s hands drifted up and down the lines of my shoulder until they clasped together over my spine and I could feel the soft rhythm of his breath in my hair. Eventually, I started to wonder if he had fallen asleep.

“No,” he answered at last. His voice was low and distant, a contrast to the immediacy of his warm body. “I like it because it feels like you.” He took several more breaths, and then said, so low I could barely hear it, “It feels like home.”

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Chapter 32

The sounds of Bubbe's feet on the stairs woke us less than an hour later. We jumped out of my small bed, giggling like guilty teenagers, and stumbled around while pinching at each other in between bouts of laughter. I quickly dressed casually in jeans, a thin black sweater, and my worn black motorcycle boots before we left to go see Dad.

Brandon stayed in the hospital lobby to work on his computer while I took the elevator up to where Dad was in recovery. He'd been moved out of the ICU, thankfully, which meant he was doing well. I found him lying in bed, flipping through the TV channels, a curtain pulled around the bed of the other patient in the room.

I knocked lightly on the open door, and Dad looked up. His face still had a gray pallor with dark circles under his eyes, but it brightened when he caught sight of me.

"Pips!" he croaked with a hoarse, strained voice.

I winced as I walked in and sat down in the seat next to his bed. "Hey Dad."

He turned off the television and allowed me to take the remote and set it on his side table. Then I gently gave his good hand a squeeze. The bruises around his face were already starting to turn a mottled mix of purple, yellow, and blue, and it looked like the swelling around his cut eye was starting to go down. He gave me a sheepish grin, and grimaced when the movement in his face jogged the mask over his nose.

“Careful, old man,” I said, though I couldn’t stop my voice from wavering. Before I could stop them, tears welled up and started to fall down my cheeks. I bent over and buried my face in his leg. “Oh, Dad.”

He didn’t say anything, but I felt his good hand stroke my head gently, weaving the fingers lightly through my tangled waves. My sob came, hard and heavy, wracking my body in brutal shakes and heaves.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, over and over again. “So sorry, baby.”

His words only made me cry harder, and I didn’t stop until a nurse bustled in, announcing with some awkwardness that she needed to take his vitals.

“Of course,” I croaked, pushing my chair back to give her room. I grabbed a tissue from the nightstand and dabbed vainly at my eyes, where no doubt streams of mascara tracked down my cheeks. I sniffed back the last of my tears and watched vaguely as the nurse took my dad’s blood pressure and checking his other vital signs.

“Everything looks good, right, Gina?” Dad asked with a sly smile. “Good enough to steal you away from that husband of yours, right?”

Gina, who was probably in her early sixties, just rapped him lightly on the head and made a few marks on his chart. “We have to watch this one,” she told me with a grin. “He’s up to no good. I’ll be back in an hour, so behave, Danny, you hear?”

“Not if I can help it,” Dad said with a weak grin at me as Gina walked out. I did my best to smile back, but Dad’s face fell at my expression. The tears rose again.

“Oh, Pip, baby, please don’t cry,” he begged, reaching out with his good hand, although I was too far away to touch.

I took a deep breath and pushed the tears away. “No. I’m okay. Sorry.”

Dad watched me carefully and laid back into his pillow, clearly worn out by the interaction with the nurse. “I’m so sorry, Pip,” he said again quietly. “I’m so sorry you have to deal with this.”

“You’re sorry,” I repeated numbly. I stared down at my hands, which gripped the cool, metal arms of my chair. My knuckles turned white before I released them. Another tear fell; I sniffed it back, and looked up at my dad, who was watching me with obvious caution.

“Dad,” I said softly. “Daddy.”

“Pip, I—”

“You could have died.”

We stared at each other, the gravity of the words falling between us like a gavel. He was lucky his injuries weren’t worse. He was lucky he wasn’t at the bottom of the East River. He knew it, and I knew it.

I stared at his maimed right hand, which was resting in a suspended sling hanging from the bed.

“What did the hand doctor say?” I asked.

Dad shrugged, then winced at the movement. “Oh, he hasn’t come yet. They said he’d be here this morning, but I haven’t seen him.”

I nodded, not knowing what else to say. I’d wait for the doctor to come before I left so I could help Dad negotiate the treatment plan. I reached out as if to touch his hand, but pulled it away when he shirked at even the idea of it. Dad stared out the window next to him. A pair of pigeons tapped lightly at the pane, but beyond them, there was only the red brick siding of another hospital wing.

“Dad,” I said gently. “Dad?”

He looked back at me, his tired eyes full of pain and fear and glossed slightly with tears. “Shit, Pips. I’m just so damn ashamed, you know? I never wanted you or Ma to get wrapped up in all of this, and now I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

It was obvious he wasn’t just talking about his hand.

“It’ll be all right,” I told him, wishing I could say it with more conviction. “I promise, it will be all right.”

~

Doctor Bennett stopped in shortly after the nurse, moving in a bustle and hanging some of the X-rays that had been taken the night before. He rattled off the Latin names of at least five different breaks in his hand. Dr. Carraway hadn’t been lying last night—Dad’s hand really had been effectively crushed.

“I see a lot of construction workers with this kind of injury,” Doctor Bennett said as we all gazed at the blurred

lines of the X-ray. “Usually when some kind of beam falls on their hand.”

“It was a hammer,” Dad corrected him quietly.

My stomach dropped, but I stayed quiet.

The doctor cleared his throat before informing us that Dad would need at least one extensive surgery to repair the damage, and at least six to nine months of physical therapy to regain use of his hand, although full use would could take up to two years, maybe longer. When I asked about the piano, Dad turned white and shook his head. Doctor Bennett, an abrupt, middle-aged man with a scant sense of bedside manner, had taken one look at Dad and said he’d make that assessment after the surgery. Dad would be able to finish recuperating from the liver surgery at home after all, but he’d need to come back early next for the first, and hopefully the only, surgery on his hand.

After the doctor left, I waited until Dad fell asleep, napping with his next round of Percocet, before going down to find Brandon and run some errands. I wanted the house to have everything he loved when he came home tomorrow. Brandon, feeling helpless, insisted that I allowed David to drive us from place to place while Brandon continued to work in the backseat via teleconference. I had told him there was no reason—he could go back to Boston instead of waiting around for me, but there was no convincing him otherwise.

So we zig-zagged around Brooklyn, picking up random things I thought Dad would like—a cheesecake from Junior’s, whiskey from the liquor store, knishes from a deli just off Ocean Avenue. Brandon had the brilliant idea of stopping at a

mall to purchase an iPod and a music streaming service. Dad, of course, wouldn't be able to listen to his record downstairs while he was on bedrest.

When we stopped to pick up some of Dad's favorite challah from a bakery on Coney Island Avenue, David ended up parking the car across the street from Nick's bar. I knew it was a bad idea, but I had too much angry energy built up after the hospital visit. I decided to pop in to see if the barman had delivered my message. Maybe I wouldn't have to wait until Monday to talk to the guy who had beaten my father senseless.

"I'll be right back," I called through the backseat window to Brandon, who looked suspiciously up from his phone call.

"What?" he mouthed, but I just tossed the bread on the seat and took off across the street as soon as the next car passed.

Considering it was only a few hours into the afternoon, Nick's wasn't technically open, but I knew the curmudgeonly bar owner would get there early to prepare for sound check and do inventory or whatever else was needed to open a bar. The narrow space seemed even darker than usual in contrast with the bright sunshine outside.

"Nick?" I called as my eyes adjusted just enough to make out the shape of his lumbering form behind the bar, where he was refilling bowls of nuts.

He looked up with surprise. "Hey, kid, what are you doing here?"

"I just came to drop off a message for Victor," I said as I approached. I didn't need to use his last name; Nick would

know exactly who I was talking about.

“Ah, well, actually, funny you should say that...” Nick nodded his square-shaped head in the direction of the stage area, where a small card table had been set up and was surrounded by four men in cheap slacks and button-down shirts. I recognized the one closest to us immediately: Victor Messina.

“What’s he doing here?” I whispered. Was this where Dad had run up his debts? I doubted his trouble was really stirred up at a horse track.

Nick shrugged, obviously uncomfortable. “It’s a free country, Skylar, and the bar’s open.”

I looked suspiciously back at the table, which was littered with glasses of liquor and lit cigars. I frowned at Nick. Normally it was illegal to smoke inside public establishments in New York, but these guys didn’t seem to think there was any problem.

“I heard my name. What can I help you with, honey?”

Messina strode up to where I stood and gave me a head-to-toe look that made me want to jump into a shower. His stumpy form was a walking cliché for a small-time gangster: short and stocky with slicked black hair, meaty hands, and a paunch that pressed the restraints of the buttons of his thin blue shirt. He grinned lasciviously, revealing a mouth full of crooked, tobacco-stained teeth.

“You look familiar, doll,” he said. “Do I know you, sweetheart?”

It took everything I had not to roll my eyes. This guy thought he was Lucky Luciano.

“She’s Danny’s kid,” Nick put in quietly before skittering to the other side of the bar to busy himself stacking glassware.

Messina looked at me up and down again, this time a bit more critically. “That’s where I know you. You got the face. Them freckles like his. Guys, you see them freckles?” He looked back to where his cohorts chuckled back at him, but when he turned, his eyes hardened. “You wearing a wire, cutie?”

I sighed, then unbuttoned the top two buttons of my shirt and spread it across my chest so he could see clearly that there was no listening device attached to me.

Messina eyed my modest cleavage appreciatively. I clapped my shirt closed, and his belly jiggled when he chuckled again.

“Pants too,” he said as he beckoned with a few beefy fingers.

I grimaced and unzipped my jeans to reveal the top of my underwear.

“Lace, huh? We got fancy girl here,” Messina leered.

“Everything okay?”

I whirled around to find Brandon striding quickly down the long tunnel of the bar front. His eyes flicked angrily down to my undone pants, which I quickly refastened.

“Fine,” I told him, giving him my best “get the hell out of here” look I could muster. “You can wait for me outside.

We're just finishing up.”

Brandon ignored me and moved smoothly around several bar stools to come stand next to me. Reluctantly, I turned back to Messina, who was watching the two of us with obvious suspicion, an expression mirrored by the trio of goons sitting behind him.

“Who’s your friend, Red?” Messina asked in a not particularly welcoming voice.

The sound of the familiar moniker made me want to smack his doughy face, but I did my best to ignore the impulse. “No one. Just a friend come to help me out with my dad.”

Inwardly I cursed myself for the way my voiced cracked at the mention of my father’s condition. The men behind Messina snickered to each other, and I wondered sickeningly which one of them was responsible for Dad’s condition. Had only one of them beaten him nearly senseless, or had they taken turns targeting his various body parts?

“Skylar’s a friend of mine,” Brandon reiterated. “I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I’d help her out since her family had an accident.”

I didn’t miss the intensification of his accent as he spoke. I wondered briefly if the sudden change was on purpose. He showed no signs of anger or frustration—only the slight emphasis on the word accident.

“Boston, eh?” Messina asked. “South side?”

Brandon’s jaw locked, his body assuming an eerily still pose. “Dorchester.”

He set a hand casually the bar top around my back, his body language communicating me as his clear territory. I didn't hate it.

Messina raised an eyebrow knowingly. "Born and raised?"

Brandon nodded again. "Near Fields Corner. You know anyone up there?" By this point his accent was so thick the words "near", "corner", and "there" sounded like didn't include the letter 'r': "ne-ah", "cah-nah", and "they-ah".

"Yeah, yeah, I got a few acquaintances," Messina said.

They were clearly talking obliquely about the crime syndicate in Boston, and I found myself staring at Brandon in a daze. He hadn't mentioned those kinds of connections before—was he faking it?

"Yeah, I went to school with Mickey Caldero and Jimmy Foster," Brandon was saying. "We used to run together before they got locked."

"Oh, yeah?" Messina asked, his eyebrows rising in clear recognition. His thick frame relaxed at the names, and I exhaled the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. The pissing contest was officially over. "How're they doing? Jimmy's still in the joint, ain't he?"

"They both are."

They launched into a short conversation about the various times they'd both had with Brandon's old friends, getting into enough detail that it appeared that Messina had completely forgotten to ask Brandon's name, particularly after Brandon bought him another drink.

“I suppose we should get back to business,” Messina said reluctantly as Nick poured two hefty fingers of bourbon into his glass. “You all right with that, sweetheart? I’m happy to have my associates escort your tall friend here to give us some privacy.”

The way he said the word “privacy” made my spine clench, and I could feel Brandon stiffen while his fingertips suddenly pressed white on the bar top. There was no way he was leaving unless he was unconscious.

“Um, no, he can stay,” I managed.

Messina shook his head slightly in disappointment, then leaned heavily on the each of the bar. “If you say so. Honey, I’m sure you know that your father’s in quite a bit of trouble.”

I took a deep breath. “Yes, I know. I’d like to pay his debt.”

Messina raised one caterpillar-shaped brow. “All of it? Do you know how much he owes?”

I nodded. “Whatever it is, I can manage it.”

“Well, I tell you what, gorgeous, since I like you and your friend here, I’ll make you a deal. If you can get me twenty-five percent of the two-hundred K your dad owes me by Monday, you can have until the end of the month to give me the rest.”

I swallowed, my tongue suddenly thick in my throat. Dad’s reaction in the hospital made me think it was a lot, but I wasn’t expecting that much. It would take every penny in what remained in my trust to make the first payment, and Bubbe would probably have to take out a second mortgage for the

rest. But there was nothing to be done about it. If we didn't pay, Dad would have his other hand ruined, or worse.

"Okay," I breathed, willing myself to sound more steady than I was.

"Skylar—" Brandon murmured behind me.

"It's fine," I said a little louder, looking straight at Messina. I pulled out from my purse the checkbook I'd brought with me for this exact purpose and started scribbling numbers before I was interrupted.

"That's very cute, sweetheart, but I'm gonna require cash."

I gulped, trying to keep my expression even. Of course. How stupid. Slowly I put my checkbook back into my purse and looked up. "Should I leave it here?"

Before he could answer, a paper bag I hadn't realized Brandon carrying slammed on the bar in between me and Messina.

"That's half," Brandon uttered casually, the only sign of his tension a ticking muscle in his jaw as Messina pulled out ten thick stacks of hundred-dollar-bills.

"Lucky you got a friend who knows something about how these things work, sweetheart," Messina remarked as he picked up the stacks and thumbed through them appreciatively before shoving them back into the bag and tossing it to his associates. "Count it," he barked.

"Where did you get that?" I muttered into Brandon's ear behind me.

“I came prepared,” he whispered back. Messina turned back to us, this time with renewed interest in Brandon.

“Danny knows where to deliver the rest of the money,” Messina said as he perused the tower of tension standing behind me. “He’s done it plenty of other times.”

I bit back a reply as I watched the men count the stiff bills. So this had been going on for a lot longer than I’d thought.

“And gorgeous, it goes without saying, but if I even smell of a whiff of the cops...”

“You won’t,” I sharply, forcing myself to meet Messina’s eye. “And you’ll get your money.”

“Excellent. Can I get you a drink to celebrate our business together?” Messina leered at me, his portly face twisting in a complete perversion of a smile.

Brandon’s hand slipped off the bar and around my waist, pulling me tightly to his side. “No, we’ve got some things to do,” he said tightly. I nodded my agreement, and Messina shrugged.

“All right, then, sweetheart,” he said as he looked over his shoulder to check on his lackeys’ progress. One of them gave a nod, and Messina looked back to me and winked. “I’ll see you in a month.”

At that, Brandon practically dragged me out of the bar, barely allowing me to wave briefly at Nick before we plowed back into the afternoon sun. He said nothing, just kept my hand locked in his until we were back inside the plush interior of the car.

“Go,” he barked at David, who immediately started the engine and pulled away while Brandon checked over my shoulder to make sure we hadn’t been followed out of the club. I slumped into my seat as my heart sank. Now he was involved in this mess, and it definitely wouldn’t be good if Messina or his nameless henchmen caught wind of Brandon’s money.

After we had turned the block, Brandon finally looked to me, eyes blazing.

“What the fuck were you were doing in there?” he spat. “That was really fuckin’ stupid, Skylar.” His accent was even more pronounced now than it was in the bar. This time I didn’t think it was on purpose.

I gaped. “Are you serious? Says the man who was carrying a hundred grand as walking around money!”

He looked up, his blue eyes blazing mad. “I knew what I was doin’. You have no idea what those kinds of people are capable of!”

“Actually, I do,” I retorted. “It is my dad who’s laid up in a fucking hospital, not yours. In case you forgot, this isn’t the first time he’s gotten in trouble!” I laughed, a shrill, harsh bark that seemed to echo around us. “I didn’t want to drag you into this mess, Brandon,” I said, “but apparently you seem dead set on it. This isn’t the first time I’ve had to deal with Victor fucking Messina.”

In the front seat, David’s eyes flickered back to mine in the rearview mirror before turning forward again.

Brandon pressed his lips together, considering. “How many other times?”

I crossed my arms and slumped further into my seat. I hated that I even had to tell him any of this. “Twice before. Once when I was in high school. It wasn’t a huge debt, but it was enough that we had to sell most of Bubbe’s jewelry and take a chunk out of my college fund to make good on it. The last time was during my first year of law school, and I also paid that off from my school fund.”

I didn’t mention those were only the times we’d had to deal with Messina—I wasn’t even counting the other petty debts Dad had run up around the neighborhood when I was just a kid, usually after one of the times my mom would leave. Those, thankfully, hadn’t been too life-altering, even if it caused some shady characters to show up on our doorstep every so often.

“And do you really think paying these shit heads off helps?” Brandon asked incredulously. “Who do you think it is that gets him back to the tables and track?”

“You don’t know that,” I said weakly.

“I know how people like this work, and so do you. Your dad’s a target, Skylar.”

“And now so are you!” I exploded, rubbing my fingers over the bridge of my nose. This entire situation was giving me a massive headache. “You think I don’t know he’s a fucking cockroach? That piece of shit and people like him have been making my family miserable my entire life. But until I can get my dad out of this goddamn city, paying him off is the best I can do!”

We sat in silence for a few moments as David pulled up in front of the house. Brandon sighed.

“Where are you going to get that kind of money?” he asked quietly.

I looked down where my hands were now clasped in my lap. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I still have some left in the fund my mother gave me for school. I was hoping to gift it to my dad for his retirement, but obviously it’s needed now. I’ll pay you back the other half once I start working this fall.”

I didn’t mention the fact that we’d still have to take a loan against the value of the house. It wouldn’t be as much as I thought, but it would still have to be done.

Brandon rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I’ll pay it,” he said. “And we’ll get your dad the hell out of New York and into rehab before he ends up back in the hospital.”

“He won’t go,” I said with a vehement shake of my head. “I’ve tried that. I begged him to come to Boston with me. But he won’t budge. He’s got four years left before he makes pension. His band is here, and my grandmother would rather kill herself than leave her house. She’s lived here her whole life—I bet I could count on one hand the number of times she’s even left the Five Boroughs.”

Brandon opened his mouth to argue, but I held up a hand.

“Besides, it’s like you said, he’s a target,” I continued. “You know how these people work. You did a decent job of convincing him that you probably got that money the same way he gets his, but if Victor Messina ever gets even a hint of

who you really are...you better believe he'll ask for a lot more than just my dad's debt."

A simple Google search would do him in; I thought again how lucky he was that Messina hadn't asked for his name, or even seen his car. The idea of those thugs showing up at Brandon's posh townhouse, threatening him or doing worse... suddenly I saw Brandon in a hospital bed. The thought made my blood run cold.

The pulled to a stop. Brandon said nothing, just stared out the window at the shabby brown house Bubbe had lived in since she'd gotten married. She'd had my father in that house. She'd raised me in that house. I knew my family; they'd never leave.

"All right," he said at last with a lot more conviction than I knew he felt. He reached out and grasped my hand, pulling me closer so he could run his thumbs over the ridges of my knuckles. "But I'll still give you the money for it."

The hell you will, I thought. "It's really fine—"

"No, Skylar." His tone was quiet, but final. He ignored my glare, opened the door, and slipped out of the car before I could respond. He walked a few steps toward the rusty metal gate and waited for me there.

After a few more moments, I followed him, allowing David to drive the car away to a safer parking location while we walked up to the house for dinner. Brandon could have his way for now, but there was no way in hell I was going to let him pay off this debt.

He waited next to me on the porch while I fished out my keys. Before unlocking the door, I turned and looked up to his sober face.

“You can go if you want,” I said quietly.

His handsome features screwed into a confused frown. “What? Why would I do that?”

“I know you’re upset with me.” I offered with a weak shrug. I wasn’t going to change my mind, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t see his side of things.

He nodded his head from side to side as if weighing my statement. “You must be crazy if you think I would leave you alone after today. After *that*.”

“I am not crazy!” I wanted to shout, but had to settle for an emphatic whisper, knowing Bubbe was likely lurking around the windows. “And nothing is going to happen. You heard him; I have until the end of the month. I’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, but baby, I’m not.”

The tenderness of his words cut the argument right out of my mouth, and I stood there, my lips hanging slightly open as I processed his words.

“What do you mean?”

Skylar, I l—” Brandon cut himself off with a quick chew of his bottom lip. “Red, if something happened to you, I wouldn’t forgive myself. And if I’m stuck at that hotel or on the way back to Boston wondering if you’re okay, well, I’ll be the crazy one then, all right?”

“I’m not cra—”

My mouth was swiftly covered by his, effectively silencing any future reply by the insistent pressure of his soft lips and the force of his tongue as he sought entry. His hands had come up to cup my face gently, and I melted, opening myself up to the tender devotion I felt in his touch. After the stress of the last twenty-four hours, I was finally ready for this—just to be held, to be cared for. I pulled away and laid my head against him, basking in the solid strength of his body.

“Please,” I whimpered into his chest. The image of Brandon hurt appeared in my mind again, and I suddenly felt broken, hollow.

“What is it, Red?” he asked, slowly stroking my hair back from my face.

“Just leave it alone. Promise me you’ll leave it all alone.”

He sighed, his handsome features contorted with obvious frustration. But when he looked at me, he must have seen something that changed his mind; his frown completely disappeared, and was replaced by a look of sadness and maybe a little understanding. He exhaled a long breath out of his nose and touched his forehead to mine.

“All right, Red,” he said quietly. “We’ll do things your way for now. But if things go wrong...”

“You can step in,” I finished. I tipped my head up for another kiss. “That’s a promise.”

~

Chapter 33

“All set?” I said as I took the clipboard holding a set of discharge papers from Dad and handed it back to the nurse.

She nodded. “That’s it. An attendant will be up shortly with a wheelchair.”

Dad was already trying to swing his legs out of the bed, but the nurse stopped him with a wave of his hand.

“If you’ll just wait, sir, the attendant will help you,” she said. “Hospital policy.”

“Better do what she says, Danny.” Brandon hovered in the corner, nodding to the nurse as she ducked out of the room with a schmaltzy smile back. I rolled my eyes at her—several of the hospital staff—male and female—had been making excuses to come into the room since Brandon had arrived with me this morning. To his credit, he hadn’t been anything but distant and polite to any of them, but it was irritating just the same.

Dad sat back in his bed with a resigned sigh. The nurse had helped him dress in the sweats I’d brought from the house, so at least he wasn’t stuck in a hospital gown any more. Before he could respond, a loud buzz from Brandon’s phone filtered through the small room.

“Excuse me,” Brandon said. “I should probably take this. Hello?”

A shrill, female voice blared unintelligibly throughout the room, and immediately Brandon’s easygoing demeanor vanished into a scowl.

“She fucking WHAT?!” he exploded. He looked up to find Dad and I both staring at him curiously. “Hold on. I’m at the hospital with Skylar.” He covered the phone speaker with his hand and looked up at us with an uneasy expression. “I, ah, need a minute. If I’m not back by the time the attendant comes, I’ll meet you downstairs at the entrance. David is already there with the car.”

Without waiting for a response, Brandon ducked out of the room and out of earshot. I turned to Dad, whose bemused expression was evident even beneath the layers of bruises and nose brace.

“Got a temper, doesn’t he?”

I darted a glance back at the door. “That’s the first I’ve seen of it. I hope everything is okay.”

Dad nodded in agreement. We sat silently together, watching the news on the small television mounted in the ceiling corner while we waited. A few minutes later, Brandon reentered the room with his frown lines more pronounced than usual and his hair sticking up in the back. It clearly hadn’t been the best phone call.

“Everything okay?” I asked warily.

He ran his hand through his hair again, trying in vain to smooth it out. His efforts only made it worse. “Not really. Something’s come up. I’m so sorry, but I have to get back to Boston. M—there’s a deal that’s gone to shit. Ah, sorry, Danny.”

My dad waved away the profanity with his good hand. “Like I ain’t said worse a million times.”

I walked to where Brandon stood by the door. As if programmed to do so, his hands moved immediately to my waist and pulled me close.

“When are you leaving?” I asked.

“There’s a helicopter on standby downtown,” he murmured against my brow. He inhaled deeply, as if to breathe in as much of my scent as possible, and I relaxed a bit into his chest before pulling back to look at him while we spoke.

“Okay. Should I call a cab?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m getting one. David will still be there outside to take you home before he drives back to New York.” He released me with one arm and turned halfway to face my father. “Danny, I hope it’s not overstepping, but I’ve also arranged for a home aide to come to your house for next several weeks to help Skylar and your mother while you’re out of commission.”

“Oh, you really didn’t have to—” Dad started, but was interrupted swiftly.

“It’s the least I can do, since I don’t get to see your daughter for a few weeks.” Brandon released me completely and stepped over to Dad to shake his good hand. “Take care, Danny.”

Dumbfounded, Dad could do little but nod back and mumbled a few words of thanks.

Brandon turned to me. “Walk me out?”

“I’ll be right back,” I assured Dad, and followed Brandon to the bank of elevators at the end of the hall.

“I’m sorry I have to leave,” he said as he pressed the button to call the elevator. He pulled me back into his arms and leaned in to touch his forehead to mine. “I really did want to be here through the week.”

“I know you did,” I said. “But you’ve done too much already. You should get back. I’ll be back as soon as Dad’s through his next surgery and on the mend.”

Brandon smiled ruefully. “Hopefully it won’t be too long. I’m not sure I’ll survive without you around for two weeks.”

It was meant to be a joke, but his tone of voice made my chest constrict—the idea of being without him for more than a few days caused a massive cloud of dread to hang over my head. I was falling in love with the man. The realization my heart skipped, once, twice. Wasn’t it too soon to be thinking such things?

“Skylar, I—”

I looked up to find his eyes wide with the same vulnerability I currently felt. The hum of the hospital ward faded away, the lull of voices and the monotonous beeps of the machines muted as we stared at each other, lost completely in twin looks of something neither of us were ready to name yet.

“Skylar,” he said again, softly. “I...I—”

The loud ring of the elevator bell interrupted us. As the people filed off, Brandon leaned down and kissed me, quickly but very thoroughly, pulling me up to meet him so my toes hovered over the floor. Just as quickly, he released me, breathing heavily.

“I’ll miss you,” he said as he stepped into the elevator.

“Call me when you’re home,” I said with a feeble wave. Just his brief kiss had managed to knock the wind out of me.

He gave me a sly grin in response, and my knees weakened just a little bit more. “Bye, Red. Take care of your dad.”

The elevator doors closed. I turned around to find two of the nurses staring at me with twin expressions of pure jealousy.

“Girl,” said one of the them. “I don’t know what you are doing there. If that was my man, I wouldn’t let him out of my sight.”

“No doubt,” agreed the other one. “He looks like trouble. The good kind.”

“You have no idea,” I replied with a shy smile.

They laughed in response as I walked back down the hall to my dad’s room.

“He’s off?” Dad asked as I slumped back down in the chair beside him.

I nodded and looked at the TV, afraid of what my expression would betray.

“He’s a good man, Skylar.”

I turned to Dad curiously. He didn’t usually say much about the men I dated. Even when I’d dated Patrick and Robbie and had come home crying on more than one occasion, he’d left the interfering up to Bubbe. Dad was usually the quiet, watch-and-see kind of parent, content to let me make my own mistakes while he loved me no matter what.

“I’m glad,” he said, fighting to get the words out of his still-hoarse throat. I started to speak, but he held up his good hand in protest. “No, I am. You deserve better than an old man who’s going to ruin the family. He’ll take care of you, baby. And I’m glad to see it, especially since I can’t.”

I swallowed and walked over to sit in the chair next to the bed. This was the moment, if ever, that I could talk some sense into him. “No one has to take care of me, Dad. I want to take care of *you*.”

His mottled features spread into a wistful smile at the words, and his good hand rose up to cup my cheek gently before falling back to the bed. “Pips, you already do.”

“Dad.” I cleared my throat before continuing. I might as well get it over with. He needed to know he didn’t have to worry. “I went to Nick’s yesterday.”

The hand on my face stiffened, then dropped back to the mattress like a rock. “You did what?”

“Victor was there,” I continued. “He told me what you owe. We came to an agreement about paying it off.”

Dad’s entire body had tensed visibly, and he stared at me without blinking before shaking his head mournfully. “Oh Skylar, honey. You shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s not like I haven’t done it before.”

He opened and closed his mouth a few times, but didn’t say anything. Finally, he looked away toward the window. “So what’s the agreement this time?”

“Brandon gave him the first payment, and we’ll be able to get the rest by the end of the month. He said as long as we did

that, he'd leave you alone.”

The wrinkles on Dad's forehead became even more pronounced as he pondered my statement. “But...where are you getting the rest of the money?”

I sighed. “I'm not going to lie. Bubbe'll need to refinance the house for some of it. I don't have enough left in my trust to cover it all *and* pay for a rehabilitation program.”

His head jerked around at my last words, his eyelids blinking rapidly. “What? Honey, I really don't think I need that —”

“It's a non-negotiable, Dad,” I interrupted him quietly.

I set my hand on his leg, patting his shin lightly through the worn sweatpants. He stared at it and swallowed loudly. When he looked back to me, clearly prepared to mount another weak argument, I just shook my head.

“Non-negotiable,” I repeated.

“Skylar—” he tried again as his legs started to move, almost as if just the thought of rehab had him ready to get out of bed. I gripped his leg, indicating he was to stay put.

“*No*,” I said, this time more forcefully. “You have a problem. Your liver is busted. Your hand is completely smashed—it's going to take months for you to even be able to start thinking about the piano again. I don't know how many times you've gotten into trouble with these kinds of people—I couldn't possibly count them all—but this is now the third time I've personally had to pay off your debts to some shitty loan shark, which means that I am now involved in illegal

activities. This is the last time we're doing this. Do you hear me, Dad? The last!"

My voice was shaking by the end of my statement, even though my volume hadn't risen a bit. He watched me carefully as I spoke, his lips clenched tightly as he fought the obvious tears welling in his eyes. He felt terrible about it—that much was obvious. But I wasn't going to let him remain in a terrible cycle.

"You're going to rehab," I said definitively. "Because if you don't, I'm turning you in for illegal gambling, and for aiding and abetting known criminals."

"Now, wait a second—"

"NO!" I finally stood up from my chair, unable to keep my cool any longer. I paced away toward the door to the small shared room, where a flurry of nurses at the station looked up as I approached. I turned on my heel and walked back to my father, who watched me, his small, brown eyes wide and sad.

"You, you can't keep doing this to us, Daddy!" I cried, my voice cracking on the last word.

I hadn't called him Daddy in years, but somehow it slipped out now. He had always been my hero, even when I knew things weren't completely right with him. Even when I knew he was a fundamentally weak man—the kind of man who took back a woman who continued to emotionally abuse him, the kind of man who couldn't say no to a good game of cards even when it cost him his savings and his health. He had only ever been strong in two ways: his music and his love for me. I wanted so badly for him to extend those strengths to other parts of his life—to be the man I knew he could be.

I sat back down heavily in the chair, the metal leg screeching loudly across the tiled floor. I leaned down and laid my head on his leg. Before I could stop them, a cascade of tears poured into the thin fabric of his pants as I let out the years of pain, anguish, worry that his addiction had caused me and Bubbe. The sobs wracked through my body quickly. Once they lessened, I registered the feel of a hand stroking my head softly, combing the through the strands of my hair the way he used to when I was just a kid.

“Shh,” Dad intoned. I turned, relishing in the feel of his soft touch, and looked up to see him gazing down at me, with several streams of tears also following down his delicate features. He sniffed as a few caught in the thin line of his mustache, but kept his good hand where it was, running its fingers through my hair.

We stayed where we were—my head on his lap, his fingers in my hair—as our mutual tears dried up. When they were finally done, I sat up slowly. His hand drifted down my shoulder to grab mine and squeezed tightly.

“Oh, baby,” he said softly. He looked down at his cast, the back up at me. “Your sweet face. I’m so sorry, baby girl.”

I shook my head and wiped madly at my face, even grabbing a tissue off his small side table to dab at my eyes and nose. After I tossed it in the garbage, I took a deep breath.

“I don’t want you to be sorry,” I said. “I just want you to get better. I want you to admit you’re sick so you can get better. Please, Dad.”

He blinked at me for a moment while another lone tear trickled down his cheek, over the crow’s feet that lined his

eyes and the larger lines around his small mouth. Finally, he nodded.

“Okay, Pips,” he croaked. “I’ll go.”

Before I could reply, a knock on the open door interrupted our conversation. Dad pulled his hand out of my grasp to wipe the remaining tears off his face while I turned to greet our guest.

“Mr. Crosby?” A tall man who couldn’t have been much older than me stepped carefully into the room and hovered with his hand still on the door knob.

“Can we help you?” I asked, turning awkwardly in my chair to look more carefully at our guest.

Around six feet tall, his lean frame that filled the doorway in a tailored gray suit that looked more appropriate for GQ cover than a shoddy hospital room. A shock of jet black hair, cropped short, was combed neatly to the side, and a pair of dark brown eyes looked straight at me with a confidence that belied his youth. The man reached up, straightened the striped tie that matched his suit, and cleared his throat.

“I’m Matthew Zola. I work at the Brooklyn D.A.’s office. I was wondering if I might have a moment of your time.”

He spoke with the slightly rough edges of a local boy, although what little remained of his accent sounded more like uptown Manhattan or Queens than Brooklyn. With a name like Zola, he was probably Italian—or maybe part French—but with his browned skin and thick black hair, I guessed there was more than a little Latino parentage there too.

I glanced back at Dad, who was cowering slightly into his pillow and clenched the edge of his blanket with his good hand. Zola looked him over frankly, openly assessing the nose brace, the bandaging over his hand, and the rainbow of bruises that flowered all over Dad's face. I appraised Zola right back and raised my eyebrow.

“What is it you need?” I asked sharply.

“It's probably best that it stays between me and Mr. Crosby, miss,” Zola said kindly, in that same placating tone I had listened to Kieran use every time she spoke with a client's family member who was ignorant of the legal situation. I crossed my arms and frowned.

“No, it's fine,” Dad croaked behind me. “She's my daughter. She's also my lawyer, if I need one. She's graduating from Harvard Law next month.”

I traded a small grin with Dad—he couldn't help but brag about my education, even when his face was so beaten up he could barely speak. Zola's gaze flickered back at me with obvious, if wary, curiosity. I was the definition of inexperienced, of course, but at least he understood I could follow the conversation. Without asking, he took a seat in the second armchair facing the bed and pulled it closer to speak.

“All right, sir,” he said, although now his appeal was clearly being directed at both of us. “I work in the Criminal Enterprise Bureau, and we're currently preparing a case against the Messina crime family.”

“What are the charges?” I asked.

“Oh, they’ve got their hands in all sorts of things,” Zola eluded the question easily. “I’m sorry to bother you good folks, but when I caught wind of what had happened to you, I thought you might have something to say.”

“And what would that be?” My response was cold—this was highly irregular. Dad had flat-out refused to give a statement to the police who had been called upon his admission to the hospital. I suspected Dr. Carraway had been involved with their appearance, but why would the D.A. connect a basic assault to the Messinas?

“It’s your hand that made me think of it,” Zola said as if answering my unspoken question. “It’s sort of Victor Messina’s calling card when dealing out the, ah, consequences to people who don’t meet their end of a bargain. Very painful to have your hand messed up, as no doubt you know, Mr. Crosby.”

All three of us stared down at the bandages currently mummifying Dad’s hand. His surgery wasn’t for another few days—I knew he was on pins and needles to find out if he’d be able to use it again. Dad still didn’t say anything, just closed his eyes as if suddenly incredibly fatigued. I turned back to face Zola, who still wouldn’t meet my eyes and just kept looking squarely at my father, as if he could stare a response out of him.

“I was wondering if you could say anything about the afterhours gambling operations the Messina family has been running out of Brooklyn nightclubs,” he said. “Specifically a jazz club called Nick’s over on Coney Island Avenue.”

To my left, I could feel, rather than see Dad's body freeze—whether it was at the mention of gambling, the connection made between him and Nick's, the idea of being witness against Victor Messina, I didn't know. If this was what Messina did to people who didn't pay their bills, I hated to think what he'd do to someone who ratted him out.

“I'm afraid my father doesn't know anything about how the Messinas run their illegal businesses,” I said clearly, summoning up as much authority as I could muster. “He's a sanitation worker, not a hustler.”

“He's also a musician, and has been seen several times over the last few months handing envelopes of cash to Victor Messina and his associates in and around Nick's,” Zola shot back calmly, still keeping his eyes trained on Dad, who grimaced at his words. “Mr. Crosby, I'm not looking to cause trouble; I was just curious if you could shed any light on the situation.”

“Did you have record of the gambling, sir?” I interrupted Zola as sweetly as I could. He *still* hadn't looked directly at me, and I was getting tired of being treated like a piece of furniture when it was clear my dad didn't want to talk. “Or anything illegal beyond sharing mail?”

Finally, Zola turned in my direction. His brown eyes blazed with irritation, but the rest of his admittedly handsome features settled into a blasé expression. He studied me for a moment before answering. “No,” he admitted. “I'm sorry if I offended. We're not...you're not in any danger from us here, Mr. Crosby. But Victor Messina has done you a very serious

wrong, and saying something about it might help us make sure he can't do it to anyone else.”

When Dad still refused to say anything in response, Zola gave an audible sigh. He stood up, and the rickety hospital chair creaking with the removal of his weight. Zola set his business card down on the small bureau next to the door. “If you think of anything you'd like to share, please give me a call, day or night. Mr. Crosby. Ms. Crosby.”

With a curt nod at each of us, he left. I turned to Dad, who was staring at the empty doorway with a look of pure terror on his face.

“Are you okay?” I asked. I reached a hand out and patted my dad's leg to pull him out of his momentary trance.

Dad shook his head, grimaced, then closed his eyes and breathed deeply out his nose. “I...it's been a long goddamn weekend, Pip. I just want to go home. Would you mind turning off the TV?”

“Sure,” I said. Something was bothering me. On a whim, I grabbed a small cup with a few hurried words about getting some ice and jogged to the elevator.

“Mr. Zola!”

As the young attorney turned from the bank of elevators toward my voice, I was momentarily reminded of the opening scene of the James Bond movies where Bond turns and shoots toward a barrel of a gun. He had that look of the classic Bond actors—the dark, shiny hair, and the slight smirk on his chiseled features.

“Yes?” he asked.

I stopped as the elevator door rang open. He motioned for the people it to leave and allowed the doors to close before looking down at me.

“You mentioned that Messina has a calling card, and that’s just reserved for the people who don’t pay their debts on time. You’re right—he needs to be behind bars. But you saw my father, Mr. Zola. Did you really think he would speak up three days after he had his stuffing torn out? What do you think Messina does to a rat?”

Zola rubbed a hand over his chin. “He won’t necessarily know it’s your dad,” he said weakly, to which I only responded with a roll of my eyes. He and I both knew that as soon as the evidence was gathered and charges filed, it would have to be sent to Messina’s representation as part of a fair trial. After that, it would only be a matter of time before Dad and Bubbe had small time gangsters knocking on their doors again.

“I haven’t passed the bar yet, Mr. Zola, but I’m not an idiot,” I replied. “You’ve got to do better than this.”

Zola studied me again, this time with a frown of concentration. “What are you going into? Criminal defense?”

I frowned at the sudden change of subject.

“Are you staying in Massachusetts or coming to New York?” he continued. “I’m guessing you’re either taking job at a criminal defense firm like Loewen, Kroger and Barrymore, or you’re going to the public defender’s office. Am I right?”

I chewed on my lower lip. “Actually, I haven’t completely determined a focus yet. I like some family law and domestic violence work, but I haven’t decided where I’m going yet.”

Like most people who knew anything about the stresses of exiting law school, Zola balked, his black brows rose visibly at the statement.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” I said, willing the flush not to rise up my neck. “But that’s neither here nor there.”

He dug around in his interior jacket pocket for a moment before procuring another one of his business cards. “Well, bully for me, then. I already left one of these with your dad, but you should have one too. I happen to know the domestic violence bureau chief at the Brooklyn D.A.’s office is hiring.”

I accepted the card and stared down at it, sifting over the stark black lettering of Zola’s personal info against the simple white background. I brushed my thumb over the words, and then stuck it back in my pocket.

“If you can cross-examine anyone the way you did me back there, they could probably use you. But, Ms. Crosby?”

I looked back up at his deep brown eyes. There was a still a bit of aloofness there from our previous interactions, but now they were more friendly, bright with interest.

“Yeah?” I asked.

He looked behind me to the open door of my dad’s room, and his bright eyes flashed again. “If he has something to say, I hope you’ll help him say it. The D.A.’s office will offer him whatever kind of protection we can. Victor Messina is a bad man. The sooner he’s off the streets, the better.”

Zola reached over and pressed the down button for the elevator again. Seconds later, the bell and red arrow light flashed on, signaling its arrival.

“Please think about it,” Zola said as he stepped inside. “And if you want me to pass your resumé on to the DV unit, let me know. Pleasure meeting you.”

“Thank you,” I said, slightly stunned as I watched the doors close between us. I looked down at the business card again. It wasn’t what I was expecting when I’d ran out to meet him, but it was certainly something to think about.

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Chapter 34

It took ten more days for Dad to go through his hand surgery, get a private nurse settled (against Bubbe's very vocal arguments against it, which quickly quieted down once she realized that Annalisa make excellent Cuban-style coffee), and feel well enough to move around again. When I left he was moving about the house with relative ease, his newly bionic hand packed against his chest in a sling. He had second surgery was several weeks away—the doctors wanted to wait until the bones were healed and the swelling was reduced before working the more complicated process of tendon reconstruction.

I arrived back in class on a Thursday morning, courtesy of an early morning first-class plane ticket messengered by a certain pushy tycoon-attorney who had made no secret of wanting me back in Boston. While his concern for my father hadn't waned, it had become clear in the ten days since I'd last seen him that Brandon was extremely ready to get me home. His calls had become more frequent, his tone slightly more irritable, and he was rarely willing to let me say goodbye when we spoke on the phone. I might have found it annoyingly clingy if I didn't like the attention so much.

I walked into the clinic that afternoon, ready to make up my missed Wednesday. It was uncharacteristically busy, with a long line of people waiting at reception to meet with an attorney. I walked to the small cubicle cluster I sometimes shared with my classmates when I wasn't working directly with Kieran. Several were finishing up their early hours while

Professor Ashe moved between them, checking and rechecking their work. I was the first from the later shift.

Eric was at the desk next to mine, finishing a meeting with a new client. He nodded at me as I walked past to check in with Kieran.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Sanchez,” he said to his client before standing up to look over the flimsy walls of his office space to where I was setting down my things. “Watch out. She’s on a rampage today,” he said before popping back down to Mrs. Sanchez.

I frowned and then walked back out to Kieran’s office, where she was clearly in the middle of a contentious phone call.

“You can’t keep blowing her off!” her voiced echoed down the hallway. Obviously it wasn’t a client phone call. “It makes me look like an idiot when you and I aren’t on the same page, and she’s getting pissed off too. You’re supposed to be my client, for crying out loud! I should know these things first!”

Huh. Apparently it was a client after all. I approached the open glass door and knocked lightly. Kieran looked up with a dagger-sharp glare, and I had to force myself not to back up.

“No,” she said on the phone as she waved me in. “No, I’m not going to drop you. I wouldn’t do that. But please, will you take this shit seriously? It’s not a joke. Miranda has sharks for representation, and they’re circling the ship right now.”

The microscopic voice on the other side of the line mumbled something into her ear that made Kieran roll her

eyes. She tugged a file out of her desk and handed it to me while he spoke.

“You’re an absolute idiot,” she retorted. “A bull-headed, stubborn, complete fucking moron if you don’t do what I tell you and let me handle this. I’m not kidding.”

The voice, obviously a man’s, said something else that made one corner of Kieran’s crimson mouth lift. She shook her head, bemused.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” she scoffed. “Just keep that thing in your pants in court, all right? I don’t need a pissing contest between you and Blaine on top of everything else. Who Miranda, uh, spends her time with is Miranda’s business, and it’s not going to matter worth a damn to the judge, especially considering how long it’s been. Besides—” She looked sharply up at me and frowned. “I didn’t think you’d care about that much these days. You know, considering.”

The voice said one more thing, causing Kieran to laugh outside, a short, terse bark that I guessed was about all she was capable of when it came to humor.

“Good to hear. Well, I have to get back to it and clean up your damn mess. Again. I’ll call you later with the progress.”

With a brief word of good bye, she hung up the phone and turned to me. “Sorry about that. It’s been a bit of a catastrophe this morning, and it’s not even noon.”

“Everything all right?” I asked, holding up the slim file in my hand. “Anything I can help with?”

She opened her mouth and closed it again, as if weighing whether or not to tell me. As her underling, I was technically

protected by client-attorney privilege, but it didn't sound like the client she was speaking to was from FLS. I had never seen Kieran talk to any of the clients here like that; she was usually professional to the point of robotic.

"It's nothing," she said finally. "Just a client from my firm. A difficult one, as you could probably tell. Anyway, can you double check that motion for me? It needs to be filed by the end of the day. Then you can start taking clients."

I nodded in acknowledgment, flipping through the file to check its contents. Kieran waved me out of the office as she started dialing another number on her phone.

"Skylar?" she called as she brought the phone to her ear.

I turned around, prepared to take another request. Maybe she had changed her mind about the other client.

"Close your door on the way out," she said, and abruptly looked back down to her work.

~

I had seen three separate clients by the time the ancient clock on the wall read four o'clock, marking the end of my shift. As I finished packing up my things, my cell phone rang. I answered it quickly, not even checking the caller ID.

"Hello?" I said as I pulled on my short trench jacket.

"Hello, is this Skylar Crosby?"

"It is," I replied. I checked around my desk, making sure I hadn't left anything. I grabbed my keys from a far corner.

"Ms. Crosby, this is Matthew Zola with the Brooklyn District Attorney's office."

“Oh!” I reached behind me for my chair and sat down immediately. This required my attention. “Hello. What can I do for you? And...how did you get my number?”

There was a small chuckle on the other end of the line. “It wasn’t that hard, actually. Your grandmother is very accommodating.”

I gripped the edge of my seat. This was not good, particularly considering what Brandon and I had been up to at Nick’s before he’d left. Why had Bubbe been chatting with the D.A.?

“Apparently your father requested that any inquiries into his involvement with the Messina case be directed to his lawyer—that’s you, right?”

“Ah, yeah,” I said. “That would be me. For now. But I’m not under the impression that my father has changed his mind about testifying. He’s sustained enough personal damage over the last few weeks; I’m afraid the stress of the trial would be too much for him.” I was careful not to say anything that would directly implicate Dad, but the message was clear. He wasn’t interested in being Messina’s target yet again and ruining his other hand.

“I understand,” Zola said, unexpectedly amicable. “I hope he’ll change his decision, but I get it.”

I twisted back and forth in my swivel chair, somewhat taken aback by his easygoing demeanor. Was this supposed to be some sort of gambit? “Okay,” I said uncertainly. “Great.”

“I also wanted to let you know that the domestic violence bureau received your resume, and I put in a good word with

you with the D.A. If I were a betting man, I'd guess you'll be getting a phone call within the next few days."

Eric turned from his desk and frowned at the expression on my face. "What is it?" he mouthed at me.

I shook my head. No doubt I looked incredibly confused. Zola's remarks were completely unorthodox. He had absolutely no reason to take such an active interest in my employment—unless he wanted something. There was a slightly flirtation in his voice that made me think it wasn't just the testimony from my dad, but that didn't make any sense. I lived in Boston, and he was trying to get me a job. Not exactly the best prospects for dating.

"Ms. Crosby?"

"Sorry, that's great, thank you," I blurted out, having been caught in my thoughts. "Really. I don't know if I'm looking to relocate from Boston, but it's good to have another option."

"Especially this late in the game," Zola replied. I grimaced even though he couldn't see me. My professors had been hounding me about this issue as well—I didn't need yet another reminder that I still had no official job offers as the year was winding down.

"Thanks," I said again, this time with considerably less enthusiasm.

"It's nothing," he replied. "I hope you let me know what happens. We'd be lucky to have you down here."

"Sure," I said, although I had no intention of calling him back. It didn't matter that he looked like a Latin pop star, with the charisma of a young Johnny Depp.

It wasn't until after he hung up that it occurred to me how stupid I had been to go to Nick's myself, especially when I knew it was being watched by the D.A. and the police. Both Brandon and I could be in major trouble if anyone caught wind of the money we were giving Messina. Yeah, there was no way in hell I'd be taking that interview, or ever talking to Matthew Zola again. I didn't care how deep his dimples were.

After gathering up my things, I dialed the house phone to check in with Bubbe before leaving.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Bubbe, it's me."

"Oh, hello, sweetheart. Is everything okay, *bubbela*? Did you forget something here?"

"No, no," I said. "I got a call from someone at the Brooklyn D.A.'s office, saying he'd talked to you."

"Oh, yes, your father just asked that he call you instead, so I gave him your number. Nice fella. Very charming."

I twiddled a pencil in my hands, then set it down on the desk. "Okay. Can you call me next time before you give out my number? You know, considering everything that's happened with Dad?"

There was a brief silence, then a quiet reply. "Of course, Skylar. I'm sorry." My heart sank. Bubbe had been putting on an outward show of strength, but it occurred to me that she probably felt somewhat responsible for what had happened, simply because she hadn't kept better tabs on Dad.

I stood up and walked to the back of the office, where I could step into the breakroom for a bit more privacy from the

curious ears of my classmates.

“It’s fine, Bubbe, I promise,” I said, trying to invest as much lightness in my voice as I could. “Listen, I also wanted to ask about the refinancing application this morning. Were you approved?”

I wanted to get the money to Messina as soon as possible to get that damn monkey off my back. Or Dad’s so to speak. Dad wouldn’t be able to start a rehab program until he was finished with his second hand surgery, but at least we could remove the stress of his debt, and I could get the whole thing over with.

“Oh, I didn’t go.”

My heart fell in my chest as the familiar ball of stress in my stomach tightened. I reached a hand out to brace myself against the refrigerator, over a magnet of Sammy Sosa selling a sports drink.

“Why not?” I asked, trying and failing to keep the edge out of my voice. This was not good. It took times for these applications to be approved, and we were on a tight schedule.

“There was a phone call this morning. They talked to Danny, and whoever it was said the debt had been paid off, so Danny said I didn’t have to go to the bank after all.”

The meaning of her statement swept over me like ice as the truth behind it hit home. Someone else had paid off the debt. And only one other person knew about it besides me and Bubbe.

“I—I gotta go, Bubbe,” I said, barely taking the time to say good bye before I disconnected the call and hurriedly

dialed Brandon's cell phone number. He answered on the first ring.

"Hey, beautiful," he said. "This is a nice surprise. Wasn't expecting to hear from you until later."

"You paid off the rest of my dad's debt."

Silence echoed through the speaker. One of my classmates entered the break room, but spun on his heel at the look on my face. I turned to the sink, gripping the counter.

"Skylar," Brandon started gently. "Yes. I did. But before you freak out—"

"I told you to leave it to me!" I hissed, unable to raise my voice the way I really wanted to, but equally unable to cap the mounting fury. "You said you'd let me handle it!"

"Yeah, well, I thought about it, and that was a stupid idea!"

I held my phone out and glared at it before returning it back to my ear. "Are you serious right now?" I demanded. "I explicitly asked you to do something, you agreed, then went around my back to do the exact opposite. And *I'm* the bad guy here?"

"You are if you don't listen to me!"

The line went nearly silent again, although I could hear the sound of his breathing in my ear. Another classmate walked into the break room to grab a cup of water, so I stalked out, past the cubes where all of us worked, through the reception area, and to the street where I didn't have to be quiet any longer.

“What the fuck, Brandon!” I yelled when the doors to the clinic had closed. “Are we back at square one here? Trips to Paris and throwing money at the situation to make me like you? Completely disregarding any of my basic preferences for our relationship?”

“Goddammit, Skylar, can you just take your head out of your ass and listen?” His voice was rising too, and it only made my blood simmer in response. I yanked at the end of my ponytail in frustration and paced around the corner toward the T stop.

“Stop railroading me, Brandon,” I ordered through clenched teeth. “What the hell were you thinking? Why would you do something like this?”

“Because it was the fucking decent thing to do!” His voice roared through the speaker, forcing me to hold it slightly away from my ear, even on the street. I stopped at a bus stop and sat down, ignoring the man next to me currently digging into a box of very fragrant fried chicken. Several cars drove by blasting bachata music. I barely heard any of them.

“Your dad owed money. I have money,” Brandon was saying. “I could pay it off myself, which is a fucking drop in the bucket for me, as you obviously know. Or I could let a septuagenarian take on a new thirty-year mortgage. Maybe I should have talked to you about this first, but honestly, Skylar, you know that you’re way too proud and stubborn to say yes. And really, what the fuck kind of man would I be if I didn’t do the very easiest, simplest thing I could to protect the family of the woman I love?”

Suddenly I felt every bit of anger flow from my brain like blood from a wound. My heart rose about six inches into my throat. “The woman you...what?”

On the other end of the line, Brandon sighed. “Just come over tonight, all right? We can fight properly and make up then. Mea culpa and all that. I’ve got some things to say, and I’d really rather say them to your face.”

I bit my lip, unable to form words. He loved me? I wanted to say it back more than anything, but all I could do was stare at the gum-lined ceiling of the bus shelter. I stood up and continued walking toward the T stop.

“Okay,” I said finally. “Okay, I’ll be there.”

“Seven,” said Brandon, and hung up before I could reply.

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Chapter 35

I stood outside of Brandon's door for close to ten minutes without knocking, just watching the light bounce off the prised edges of the thick glass windows while I talked my temper down again and again as it had continued to resurface throughout the rest of the afternoon and evening. I felt like an emotional yo-yo, back and forth and back and forth between my love for Brandon and his sweet words and hatred of the situation and his actions.

It wasn't just as simple as being mad. I *was* mad, of course, but not just at him. The truth was, when Bubbe had first told me the debt had been resolved, my initial reaction was relief. It was a major weight off to know that a dangerous gangster wasn't waiting around the corner to beat the shit out of my father again, just as it was good to know my grandmother wouldn't have to accumulate her own debt at seventy-two. And for that feeling, I couldn't forgive myself. It was owing people that kind of money to anyone that had gotten us all in this mess to begin with.

Just as I was about to ring the bell, one of the massive double doors swung open. Brandon stood there in bare feet, black suit pants, and a white undershirt that hugged every one of his impressively toned muscles. He was on the phone, but still looked at me with obvious surprise.

"Hey," he mouthed, stepping aside so I could enter. The voice on the other end of the phone was loud and insistent. He closed the door and then put a hand over the phone's speakers.

“What were you doing out there?” he asked. “I was getting worried.”

I shook my head and stood still next to the console like a statue. He looked over me curiously, then leaned in for a kiss. I leaned away.

He frowned, and then his expression turned to one of caution.

“I have to go, Kieran,” he said into the phone, setting off a flurry of yelling on the other end. He turned away from me, speaking quietly, though I could hear him perfectly. “Just move it to next week. I said can’t make it tomorrow. No, I *can’t*.”

Kieran’s voice kept yelling, but I couldn’t make out what she was saying. Brandon frowned, rubbing a hand through his hair.

“I already told you, I’m not coming. Not gonna happen,” he said again, this time more forcefully. “Just deal with it. That’s what I pay you for.”

Before waiting for an answer, he disconnected the phone and set it down on the console next to me. He drew a hand through his hair again, which looked as if it had been getting that treatment a lot today. Then he expelled a long sigh.

“She sounded mad,” I remarked. “Is everything okay?”

He shook his head, but more as if to dispel the conversation rather than to answer my question. “It’s fine, just a deal that’s causing a lot of headaches. She’s overreacting.”

“We don’t have plans tomorrow. You can still go to whatever it is.” I edged a toe nervously around the zig-zag

patterns of the wood grain in the flooring. I still hadn't removed my coat. I wasn't sure how long I was going to be staying.

"We don't?" Brandon asked. Saturday was normally the day where we stayed at his house, working together.

I swallowed and looked away. Brandon reached out tentatively to touch my hand.

"Am I really in that much trouble for trying to help?" he asked.

The confusion in his voice deflated me. I sighed and set my purse on the console, then took off my coat and hung it on the coatrack.

"No," I admitted. "I'm frustrated with you, but I'm not going to dump you for helping out my family."

Still avoiding his careful gaze, I turned my head into the living room, where the fire was lit, as per usual, despite it being a relatively balmy spring day. I frowned suspiciously. The furniture had been rearranged—the large couch had been moved closer to the arched entry and turned perpendicular to the fireplace, its spot replaced with a matching love seat that now looked toward the fire. Beyond that, the firelight flickered off the edge of something large, shiny, and black. I froze.

Behind me, Brandon tried ineffectively to pull me back to face him. "Maybe we should go out to dinner. Come upstairs. I'll get dressed."

"What the hell is that?"

The question was obviously rhetorical. The piano was massive, taking up most of the space in the far corner of the

room, surrounded by the windows where Brandon had originally discovered me, yet leaving enough space for people to sit in them while...someone...played. Ignoring Brandon's continued attempts to grasp at my hand, I strode across the room to examine the instrument closer.

Like everything else in Brandon's house, it was the best money could buy. A concert grand piano, it was at least nine feet long, with glossy black lines that bore no trace of dust or fingerprints. Everything was closed to protect the interior from dust, but I knew that the inside, if opened, would reveal the massive soundboard and shiny bronze strings.

I turned back to Brandon. "This is a Steinway."

He nodded, eyes wide with caution. "Yes."

I looked back at the piano, then back at him. "This is one of the most expensive pianos in the world. It's the same piano that's played at Carnegie Hall."

He didn't affirm my statement—he didn't need to.

"Why did you buy this?" I asked, although I knew the answer. My voice was shaky—the rising tide of anxiety was building in my stomach again, a feeling of being overwhelmed that had seemed everywhere when I had first met Brandon was back.

Brandon stepped further into the room, cautiously, as if he were approaching a wild animal. "Why do you think?" he asked softly. "There's only one pianist who spends time at my home."

I couldn't move; my legs felt like tree trunks, completely rooted to the floor. He finally came to stand in front of me, and

set a hand casually on the top of the piano, uncaring of the smudges his hand would leave there. He caressed me lightly on the shoulder.

“This isn’t some lame thing to make you think I’m someone I’m not,” he said. “I told you that when I gave you something, I wanted it to be for you. From me. And this is. It’s for *you*, Red.”

The sound of my nickname shattered the fragile shell protecting the emotions that had been ebbing and flowing for the last several hours—hell, for the last two weeks. I’d just, literally a few moments ago, gotten my head wrapped around him paying off my dad’s embarrassing debt. And now he’d bought me this.

“Why?” I asked in a low, barely controlled whisper. I was afraid of letting loose all of the confusing emotions I felt. I didn’t know what I’d say if I did.

Brandon offered a shy smile, and trailed his fingers up to brush the edge of my chin. “Why? For the same reason that I do anything for you, Skylar. Because I love you.”

The words sailed over my head, as if I hadn’t even heard them. I shook my head. “This isn’t love.”

“No? Then what is it?”

“Bribery,” I spat out.

The hand on my chin dropped immediately.

“Are you serious?” Brandon’s voice broke with the incredulity.

He stepped away, standing just in front of the love seat arrangement that now faced the concert-grade piano. The instrument was a behemoth, made to fill the space of concert halls, not living rooms. Brandon gave and gave and gave, and although he had absolved my father's debts, I was steadily feeling more and more debts piling on my shoulders. I could never hope to repay any of this level of generosity. I felt trapped.

"I said I wouldn't give you any more empty gestures, Skylar. I never said I wouldn't give you anything at all." He paced nervously around in small circles, pulling his hair with both hands. "Jesus. I can't do right by you, can I?"

"That's really not the question," I said, finding it increasingly difficult to keep my voice level. Could he really not see the power imbalance in this moment? Could he really not see the problem?

"Oh, really? Then what is?" He stopped moving and faced me, his hands clasped behind his neck. His face was flushed—he was clearly trying as hard as I was to calm his own emotions.

"The question is, when are you going to stop thinking you can buy my affections?" All the anger that I'd been trying so hard to dissolve outside his door was back in a second, and now I was spitting mad again. Unfortunately, so was he.

"No, the *question* is, when are you going to start accepting mine? I love you, Skylar! Do you hear me? I fucking love you, but you can't see past the goddamn price tags to see the truth."

"And I have told you a million fucking times, Brandon, I don't need or want this kind of extravagance from you!" I

yelled. I looked down at the piano, and saw my twisted, livid features in reflected in its surface. I smacked my hand down over them as a hot, angry tear slipped down my cheek. “You suffocate me with all of this—you pay for every single date, exorbitant theater and concert tickets. You pay for my dad’s idiotic mistakes and his home care. And now you’re buying me something that costs the same as someone’s house. This is insane! I could never hope to compete with any of this!”

“It’s not a fucking competition!” Brandon shouted back. “God, you’re impossible! I can’t help that I’m rich, Skylar. You want me to stop being successful? You want me to give everything away so all I can do is take you out for pizza and walk in the park, just like every other poor student in Boston?”

“I’ve told you over and over again—I don’t want your money, Brandon, I just want you! But you never seem to fucking accept that!”

“My money *is* a part of me, Skylar! Why can’t *you* fucking accept *that*?”

We bristled at each other, seething across the open space, our chests heaving under the pressure of massive breaths and a war’s worth of effort to calm our tempers. Finally, Brandon was the first to look away.

He collapsed into the couch behind him, his palms lying open across his knees. He stared at them as if looking for something to materialize from their empty spaces.

“I’d give you everything I have if it would convince you I was for real,” he said in a cracked voice. “I’d give you my life if it would protect you and your family. This isn’t some trade, Skylar. I just want to make you happy. You love to play, and I

love to hear it. I just want to make your life better the way you make mine better. I love you, don't you see that?"

The break in his words matched the fissures in my anger, which was receding with every pained word he spoke. Okay, so maybe this wasn't some stupid gesture of ego. His words echoed through my heart, over and over again, as I finally recalled the words he'd been repeating all evening. Loved. He loved. Me.

A sob choked my throat as I quickly crossed the room and fell to the floor on my knees in front of him. I pulled one of his big hands to cradle against my cheek. The rough, warm edges of his fingers curled naturally into the contours of my face, and I felt his other hand clasp gently, awkwardly to my hair.

"I don't want your life," I cried against his leg. The last two weeks had been trying enough—I didn't want to feel apart from him. He had so quickly become the one place I felt safe in the world, and I didn't want to lose that. "I just want you," I whimpered, over and over again. "That's all. Just you."

Brandon sighed and leaned down to pressed his lips into my hairline. "Why does it make you so upset? I'm not asking for anything in return."

I sighed and looked up, letting his hands come to cup my cheeks gently while he searched my face for a response. His thumbs gently wiped away the last of my tears.

"I don't know," I finally admitted. "Even the smallest gifts from people never come without strings. These kinds of things..." I gestured vaguely toward the piano, "They're too much."

“Come here.” His hands dropped to my shoulders to pull me toward him. “Get off your knees. It makes me feel like you’re my servant, which is really inappropriate considering the content of this discussion.”

I grinned ruefully, but pushed off my knees and sat next to him on the sofa.

“No,” he said, tugging my body so that I straddled him, my arms balanced gently over his shoulders. “I said come *here*.”

His hands rose up my back and pressed me down so he could kiss me, gently, yet thoroughly.

“Let me take care of you, Skylar,” he said. “The way you take care of me.”

“Do I take care of you?” I wondered.

“In a million different ways,” he said, his blue eyes twinkling. “Do you love me?”

I didn’t have to think about that. He’d said it several times tonight, but I had been too caught up to respond.

“Of course,” I said fervently. “I *do* love you, Brandon. I love you so, so much.”

“Then stop making it a contest between the two of us, Red. You give me so much more than any of this shit. You are irreplaceable to me. You’re it, Skylar.”

His words, though simple, overwhelmed me, overflowed my heart with equal love. And yet, there was still one question lingering in my mind. One question left to answer.

“Why?” I asked softly. He could have anyone—anyone in the world could take one look at him and fall over themselves to have everything Brandon Sterling had to offer. “Why me?”

“Because you’re real. And honest. And kind. And smart. And talented. And, and, and...” he trailed off, waving a hand as if there were too many amazing qualities to list. I giggled, earning a shy smile that only made me laugh more.

“But even more than all of that,” he continued, “I feel like more than anyone else in my life, you really see me. You see who I am in a way no one else does, and you made me feel something again. You are my heart, Skylar.”

He gazed up at me, his large blue eyes twin mirrors in the soft evening light.

“I see you, Brandon Sterling,” I confirmed softly, touching his lips with my finger. He bit it softly, then released it. “I see you, and I love you.”

I leaned down to kiss him gently, but his hand braced my head to tug me closer, begging entry to my mouth, which I granted willingly. His hands roved, grasping desperately at my shirt, pressing me into me into his chest and groaning painfully, as if he couldn’t get close enough.

Finally, he stood up, his mouth fused to mine, and keeping me straddled around his waist with his big arms. His kiss was sensual, but it wasn’t until he broke it that I realized he wasn’t carrying me toward the stairs, but instead over to the piano. He squatted down and released me onto the bench.

I looked bemusedly at the piano in front of me. “You know, this is really too much instrument for a house. The

sound on this is designed for massive concert halls. It will break your ear drums if you ever open the top.”

Brandon stood up and grinned. “Well, you’ll have to help me choose something more appropriate, then.”

I gave him a small smile. “Maybe.”

“Definitely,” he corrected me. “But before we do, will you play something for me on it?”

He stepped away from the piano, sank his long, lean frame back into the love seat that now faced the instrument, and looked at me expectantly. I opened my mouth to argue with him again, but I couldn’t quite do it. I stared down at the beautiful piano, lost for a moment in admiring the way the warm lighting of the room blinked off its sleek, polished lines. I’d probably never get another chance to play on something of this caliber again. I closed my eyes, hearing the notes already.

I gave in.

“All right,” I said. “You win.”

“Do you know any love songs?” Brandon asked as I took a seat at the bench and turned up the fallboard to reveal the long row of untouched black and white keys beneath it.

I pressed a finger lightly on upper C to hear the sweet, clear tone expel throughout the room. I grinned.

“I play classical music, Brandon,” I said with a small smile. “They’re all love songs, in some way.”

“Then play one that reminds you of us.”

I nodded and turned back to the piano. I didn’t have to consider the request long; the brooding, angsty melody of

Chopin's Waltz in C Minor came fervently and immediately. Given the frustration, worry, and longing I'd been feeling nonstop for the past week and a half—for the past several months, really—it was easy to pour myself into the lilted phrases of music that seemed to reflect exactly the shifting polarities of Brandon's and my relationship. At times my feelings felt as natural as could be, no harder than a walk in the park. He was so easy to love. But at other times, I felt like I was being swept up by a tide, lost in one of Chopin's furious arpeggios or the multi-octave scales that spilled up the keys like a loose wave. Falling in love with him was simple, but we still fought, still clashed as only two people as strong-willed as we were bound to do.

The piece was short, but it did my feelings justice—better than I could ever do with words. It wasn't until the end that I realized I'd played the entire thing with my eyes closed. When I opened them, I found Brandon standing next to me, staring at my hands with a look of awe. I took them off the keys and released the pedal; he blinked and sat down next to me on the bench with a thump.

“When...why...why did you choose that one?” he asked quietly.

I shook my head. It was hard to explain, especially to someone who didn't know music. “I don't know. The minor key, maybe, and the alternation between a walking cadence and the arpeggios—”

“That's the fast part?”

I nodded. “I think the combination of all of that, probably, is why I chose it. It just...came to mind, I guess.”

He nodded, drifting one finger across the shiny surface of the keys, but not pressing any down.

“It was intense,” he said quietly.

I nodded again. “Yes.”

He turned to me with a small smile that caused the skin at the edges of his eyes to crinkle. “Intense,” he repeated. His eyes flickered down to my lips. “Is that what this is?”

“I thought you said it was love.” My own gaze dropped a bit to focus on his mouth as well.

“Love,” Brandon repeated again. He tipped his head to the side. “It doesn’t seem like enough,” he said just before he captured my lips with his. Then, just as he broke away again: “Move in with me.”

I gasped. That was the last thing I was expecting him to say. “What, here?”

“Well, I don’t think I’m allowed to live at the law school, Red,” he said with a brief smile, but his expression quickly turned serious while he awaited my response.

I stared at him, dumbfounded. “You’re serious. It’s only been, what, two months since we met?”

“Two months and sixteen days. And yeah, I’m completely serious. I’d probably ask for more if I thought I had a chance in hell you’d say yes.”

I didn’t even want to entertain what he meant by that. Brandon continued to stare, refusing to break eye contact even once, while I blinked, over and over again, trying to process this possibility.

“And before you say you don’t want all my money, that’s not what I’m proposing. This isn’t me buying you a condo, Red. It’s asking you to share my home.” He took my chin in hand and forced me to look directly at him. “I love you. Don’t overthink this.”

“But...we just met...and we barely know each other,” I sputtered. I pulled my chin away, but continued to look at him. “I love you too, but it’s a bit soon, don’t you think?”

He shrugged, finally looking down at the keys, sliding his fingers over their shiny surface. “I don’t really care about that. I only know that I wake up wishing you were with me, and I go to sleep thinking about your face. I want to hear you play this piano every day, and listen to you grumble about your work, and just be with you when you finally you soar, because I know you will.” He sighed. “The best times I have with you are when we’re just being together. No fancy dinners, no fancy clothes. Just sitting on the couch, reading in our sweats. I don’t want to wait until Friday every week to do that.”

I ventured a small smile when he peeked back at me. “So basically, you want me to be an old married couple with you?”

“Well, minus the old,” he said with a smirk before sneaking a quick kiss. He didn’t linger—he wanted an answer to his question.

I looked away, unwilling to call him on that bluff. “I’ll have to think about it. I’ve already paid for student housing through the end of the semester, so I’m not moving anywhere before then.”

“But you’ll have to move somewhere, right?”

I looked back to him, and found him watching me with a raised brow and a knowing expression. I rolled my eyes.

“Yes,” I admitted. “I will.”

The truth was, I wanted to shout “yes!” and throw myself into his arms. Despite our occasional hiccups—like the one tonight—I felt the same. I wanted to sit with him on a couch, watch our careers, our lives grow together. I felt loved with him, safe with him, not to mention completely turned on by him. I wanted to play house too.

I pulled on the collar of his t-shirt nervously. He’d been making grand overtures since we met, and I’d been fucking them all up, too scared to take what he was offering. Maybe it was time for me to make one of my own.

“Okay then,” I said softly. I looked up, finding his eyes wide and vulnerable while he waited for me to speak. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

Brandon didn’t breathe for a moment. “Really?”

I offered a small smile and leaned in. “Yes,” I said, and kissed him.

Like the music, his kiss started out light and easy, but quickly slipped into something more torrid. We grasped at each other frantically, our tongues warring and adoring at the same time. He managed to get one arm around my waist long enough to yank me onto his lap, causing the piano bench to creak loudly under the pressure of our stacked weights.

“Wait,” I breathed in between his insistent kisses. His hands were flying up my shirt, tearing it over my head so his

mouth could cover every square inch of my neck, shoulders and chest.

“Ignore it,” he muttered as he unsnapped my bra and threw it down to the ground. With a half-painful, half-enraptured groan, he buried his face into the sensitive skin between my breasts.

I followed his order. Instead, I focused on tugging and pulling his shirt over his head, eager to feel the smooth, taut expanse of his toned chest beneath his fingers. His lips found mine again as one hand clasped the back of my head, holding it still so he could conquer my mouth completely. I grasped at the skin around his back, hard enough to make him jerk at the feeling of my fingernails digging into his shoulders. He grunted and yanked me even closer. It was no good. We couldn't get close enough.

With a groan, he pushed the bench back with his feet and stood up, wrapping his free arm underneath my legs to keep me firmly tucked around his waist. I kicked off my pumps and hooked my ankles together, unwilling to give up any space between our bodies while I maintained contact between our mouths.

“Need you,” Brandon heaved in between kisses. “Need you. Now.”

“Yes,” I agreed, wholeheartedly, then stopped when I realized he wasn't carrying me upstairs or even to the couch, but just enough steps to set me on top of the closed piano. “Whaaaat are you doing?”

His mouth drifted back down my torso as he pushed me back onto the hard, polished surface. The buttons on my pants

popped under the pressure of his fingers.

“What do you think I’m doing?” he mumbled before taking one of my nipples deeply into his mouth, causing me to jerk beneath him. He tugged insistently on my pants and finally succeeded on peeling them, along with my underwear, completely off. They fell to the floor beside my blouse and bra.

“You can’t fuck me on a hundred-thousand-dollar instrument!” I cried out, although my treacherous body only urged him on as my hips thrust upward toward his waiting hands as if by their own accord and my hands clutched desperately at the blond thicket of curls that was moving steadily down my stomach.

“I bought it to play, Red,” he growled. “So let’s play.”

His tongue dipped into my navel, causing me to squirm, but his hands gripped my backside and held me still. He wrenched my legs open, spreading me like a buffet across the piano top.

“Jesus, baby,” he breathed as he looked over me. I squirmed again, but his hands kept me still. One released me long enough to swipe a long finger up the center of my core. The finger traveled up until it was poised over my mouth.

“Suck,” he ordered, his eye dark with desire.

Obediently I opened my mouth and took the salty-sweet blend of myself and his skin onto my tongue, sucking hard and then releasing with a sudden pop. His eyes darkened to a navy blue. The hand traveled back down my body, pinching one nipple as it went and causing me to yelp. My hips were

starting to thrust toward him—I craved his touch, any kind of it.

“Do you like the way you taste, baby?” he asked as he leaned down, tracing his mouth over the soft skin of my lower stomach and inner thighs—anywhere but where I desperately wanted him to be. One finger, then two gently slid into the warm depths there, and I bucked.

“Please,” I breathed, barely able to get out any words. I wanted him so badly I couldn’t think.

“Easy, baby,” he said, laying kisses closer and closer, nuzzling his face in between my legs without actually making any contact with his mouth. A third finger slipped in with the first two, stretching me delicious as they all made contact with that delicate bundle of nerves inside me. I groaned as he blew cool air over my most sensitive parts.

“Brandon,” I whimpered. “Please.”

“Please what, gorgeous?” His voice rumbled and teased against my tender flesh. “I don’t know what you want if you don’t say it.”

“Please...ah!” I cried out as his finger twisted within me before resuming their steady, pulsing movements. “Fuck! You know what I want.”

He leaned down and gently rubbed the tip of his nose over my clitoris. “Do I?”

“Gah! Yes, you do!” I thrust my upward, trying to catch the edge of his lips, his tongue. I desperately wanted contact, and he refused to give it to me. Instead, he pulled his nose away.

“You smell so good,” he murmured with a brief kiss to my inner thigh, and another into the small patch of hair that surrounded his fingers. “You have no idea how badly I want to taste you. But you’re going to have to say it.”

“Taste me,” I repeated. His fingers had picked up their pace, and I was starting to lose feeling in my legs.

“Taste what, Skylar? Say it.”

“Taste my...oh, God...taste my pussy. I want you to eat my pussy!”

He grinned devilishly. “Your wish is my command, babe.”

“Brandon!” I yelped as his mouth finally found me.

The scratch of his unshaved cheek was deliciously rough against the smooth skin of my inner thigh. He alternately between licking and sucking over the tender nub of my clitoris, his occasional deep growl vibrating pleasantly over the sensitive flesh. His tongue was voracious, teasing and exploring as if he couldn’t get enough of me, couldn’t *taste* enough of me. I moaned, thrusting hard against the insistent rhythm set by his fingers, fucking them, fucking his face with everything I had.

All of the energy in my body seemed to be gathering around his mouth and fingers. The hand that had been holding me down at the hips released and reached up to tweak one of my nipples, pulling on the hardened nub in time with the fingers inside me.

“Oh, FUCK!” I screamed as his tongue twirled around the sensitive bundle of nerves, complementing the pressure from

inside and beneath it. “Oh, God, Brandon...fuck...I’m... ohmygodI’MGOINGTOCOME!”

My orgasm swept through me fast and hard, pulsing through my tensed limbs in time with his fingers and mouth. He hummed against my skin as he worked out the thrum of my heartbeat, his free hand grasped around my waist as I shook violently against him. I came, in wave after wave until every last bit of energy within me had been spent.

At last, when all of the tension was gone and I had flopped back against the lacquered piano top like a shot animal, he gently removed his fingers and lifted his mouth. He leaned his head onto my thigh, looked up, and smiled sweetly at me.

“I love making you do that,” he rumbled against my skin before standing up. His hands ran up the sides of my body, gently slipping under my back and lifting me up to lay against his chest. I was limp, like a rag doll.

“I love you,” I muttered against the smooth skin of his shoulder. He chuckled and arranged my arms around his neck.

“I love you too, Red,” he said. One arm reached under my legs, the other braced around my back, and in a fluid move, he picked me off the piano. He turned and started walking us toward the stairs.

“Where are we going?” I asked drowsily, content to play damsel in distress. *He’d* distressed me, after all.

“Upstairs,” he said with a brief kiss on my cheek. He was moving quickly, with a lot more energy than I currently possessed. “First we’re going to do *that* again, and then I’m going to finish the job properly.”

Just the thought had me perking up. I bit his shoulder lightly, earning a devilish grin. “Sounds good to me.”

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Chapter 36

I woke up the next morning in a pool of light. Nestled in the impossibly soft white sheets of Brandon's bed, I blinked my eyes open against the bright sunlight streaming in from the tall bay windows. Reaching my hand out next to me, I realized that I was the only denizen of the bed and sat up, my sex-rumpled hair falling down my bare back.

Scooting off the bed, I padded into the walk-in closet across the room in search of something to wear—my clothes, as far as I knew, were still scattered around the piano. My stomach clenched at the thought. The piano he'd bought for me. "I love you," he'd said. "Move in with me." The words still rang, sweet and soft, as if they had just been uttered.

I glanced around the closet as if I hadn't been in there several times already. It was bigger than my entire bedroom. One wall was hung with evenly spaced designer suits, the opposing side full of various shelves and drawers with immaculately folded basics. The third was completely stocked with shoes and other accessories, and an ottoman as big as a double bed sat in the middle of the plush carpeted floor. Where would my homely belongings go in here? Could I get used to living in this kind of splendor? Would I ever feel completely normal in it?

Despite the centrally heated air, I shivered, and not just because I was naked and slightly cold. Tiptoeing across the carpet to the enormous shelves lined with jeans, t-shirts, sweaters, and other casual apparel, I ran a finger over some of the soft cotton materials, all of them brand new. Brandon must

have owned at least fifty plain white t-shirts. I tugged open a few drawers and found yet more work out apparel and stacks of undershirts. I didn't even think I owned fifty shirts period.

At the bottom of one drawer, the edge of a ratty blue shirt caught my eye, and I tugged it free to find a worn Red Sox logo smeared with a bit of paint splatches here and there. I smiled, pulled the thin cotton over my head. In the mirror, I caught a glance of myself practically swimming in the shirt. I could smell Brandon in the thin, time-softened fabric. I grinned in spite of myself. I may not have felt—yet—like I belonged here, but I was happy. Filled with sudden delight, I decided to run downstairs and share those feelings with Brandon.

I made my way down the two flights of stairs to the kitchen, where I could hear the deep tones of Brandon's voice in conversation with someone else.

“So if she shows up, I'm not home, got it?” he instructed Ana, who was intently scribbling his instructions in a small notebook. “Otherwise, you've got the rest of the weekend off until Monday. We'll want the place to ourselves.” He turned when he heard my footsteps approach the arched entryway into the kitchen. “Hey, there she is.” His eyes flickered over my rag-tag outfit, prompting a wide grin to spread on his face. “Did I convert you?”

I looked down at the Sox logo and back up with a grin. “Well, I'll always be a Mets fan, but I'm starting to come around on Red Sox Nation.” I glanced over at Ana and sent her a shy smile as a flush rose up my neck. Shit, I was

standing here in her boss's clothes. And this t-shirt was very thin.

"I'll be downstairs doing the wash if you need me, Mr. Sterling," she said with a warm smile my way. She tucked the notebook into the back pocket of her jeans, hefted a basket full of rumpled clothes, including the ones I was wearing last night, and disappeared down the back stairs.

Brandon poured me a cup of tea and set it on the counter next to a small pitcher of cream and a porcelain cup of honey. I shuffled over to fix my tea while he walked over the chaise lounge under one of the large windows and sat down, mug of coffee in hand.

"Not that you don't look sexy as hell in my clothes, Red, but where the hell did you find that shirt?" he asked.

I leaned against the counter, sipping my tea, one of his fancy Chinese blends. Damn, that was good. No Lipton for this man, that was for sure. Okay, so maybe I was okay with some of the perks of living with someone as rich as Croesus.

I shrugged. "It looked like the most comfortable thing up there. I didn't want to ruin any of your new shirts, which seemed like almost everything else."

He gave me a funny little half-smile and gazed at me with a raised eyebrow. "Is there really something so wrong with the finer things in life?"

"Nothing at all," I lied, raising my own brows in return. "I'm just not sure why you need so many of them. Most of your t-shirts still had tags on them."

He smiled again, this time grimly. “Yeah. Well. I guess when you know what it’s like to go without, you don’t ever want to have to do it again.”

“Bubbe says that. She was born during the Depression.”

“She’s a smart woman.”

I took another sip. “Yeah, well, she also hoards cans of food that are ten years expired. Sometimes we even find them in her closet.”

“Hey, she knows how to prepare for the worst.”

“By getting too much of everything?”

“It works, doesn’t it?”

We sipped silently, the slurping sounds echoing softly in the open space of the kitchen. It only emphasized just how enormous this place really was. Four floors, plus the servants’ apartments; thousands of square feet, most of which Brandon likely didn’t use. For one man to live here...it was beyond decadent, really. It was obscene.

“You don’t even use half the rooms in this place,” I pointed out as I looked around the massive kitchen and out to the solarium. “It’s so huge. Doesn’t it feel empty?”

He shrugged from his seat on the lounge, where he was lying back against the backrest, his feet kicked up on a pillow.

“I keep it full of interesting people,” he said with diffidence, echoing the famous line from *The Great Gatsby*, although I wasn’t certain it was intentional. “It’s the best.”

I considered his defense for a moment. “And you like the best?”

He shot me a sharkish grin. “Always, Red. You know that.”

I gulped. Something kept nagging at me, something that kept telling me how very out of place I was in a house like this. With someone like this. I needed to ask again. “Then why settle for me?”

He blinked at the question as the grin dropped from his face. After pondering the question for what seemed like forever, he sat up from his position on the lounge, raised a very sexy finger, and beckoned me to where he was, pulling me next to him on the chaise as he leaned us back together. I basked in the feel of his palm sliding up my thigh while the other pulled my head onto his chest. He was so warm, so large, I couldn’t help but feel completely safe tucked into the crook of his arm.

“I think that question says more about you than it’s asking of me,” he said, stroking my hair. He pulled it lightly at the end of each stroke in a way that rendered me complete putty. “But I’ll answer it anyway. Aside from how beautiful you are, Red, you’re above all genuine. You’re genuinely intelligent. You’re genuinely kind. And even though you obviously have a low threshold for bullshit, you’re genuinely a loyal, dedicated person. But most of all, you’re honest. There’s no guile in you, no malice. It may not be the most valuable quality for a lawyer, but I love that I can see every emotion on that glass face of yours. I see you, Red. Just like you see me.”

I was glad that face was currently buried into his chest so he couldn’t see the emotions that were certainly melting across it.

“More like a freckle face,” I muttered into his pec, trying to distract from what probably the best compliment I had ever been given. I had always hated the smattering of freckles that decorated my cheeks and nose, thinking they made me look like a little kid.

“It’s a unique, fucking gorgeous face,” he insisted, sitting me up so I straddled his waist and he could reach around and clasp my mussed mane between his hands. His eyes burned with such obvious intensity, I couldn’t have looked away if I wanted to.

“You’re a classic ginger with a twist,” he said, stroking my cheekbones with his thumbs. “Hair like a sunset, green eyes, high cheekbones, those full, insanely kissable lips. But instead of the pasty skin most redheads have, yours is olive-toned under your freckles, like an Italian’s. Why is that, by the way? Is your mom dark?”

“No, you can thank Bubbe for that,” I said with a shrug. “Jew.”

“Ah. And your freckles are from the Irish side, right?” When I nodded, he smiled. “I could get lost in this face, Skylar.” He paused, drifting his lips over the contours of my cheeks and over my eyelids. “I think I already have.”

Before I could tell him that his own face, with its straight, geometric lines, wide blue eyes, and deceptively full lips, drew me to him like a moth to a flame, he closed those lips over mine and showed me just how lost I could feel in him too.

“Please,” I whimpered when he finally let me come up for air.

“Please what?” He trailed his lips down my neck, dragging his teeth lightly over the edge of my shoulder blade as his hands lightly tugged his shirt off my body, leaving me naked in the morning light.

“Won’t Ana or one of your other...ah...people see us?” I asked, although I was already too distracted by the feel of his mouth on my bared skin to care much if anyone saw me sitting here without any clothes on.

“Don’t,” he growled in my ear, causing goose bumps to rise all over my skin. “I’ll worry about them. You just focus on what I’m doing to you.”

His hands floated down my neck and over my shoulder to settle over my bare breasts, cupping each one briefly, as if to measure their weight.

“Watch my hands,” he murmured. “Watch the way I touch you. Watch how you respond.”

Obediently, and barely able to breathe, I followed his orders and watched, completely rapt, as his thumbs brushed feather-soft over the smooth skin of my nipples, causing them to pebble in delight. He sighed with satisfaction, and seized the tips between his thumbs and forefingers, tugging and twisting gently until each nipple visibly protruding toward him. I gasped with the shock of it, mired in the pleasure and pain of his touch. Brandon hummed with appreciation, tugging forward, and forcing me to lean into his waiting mouth.

His teeth clamped lightly over one nipple, and I yelped quietly in reaction to the stark, thrill that shot through my body. He took his time, teasing and nipping, rolling the tight, tender nub between his teeth while his fingers continued their

torture on the other side. My hands tangled into his hair, when he switched to the other nipple, merciless in his onslaught until I was writhing atop his hips.

I reached down to the hard, obvious protrusion pressing against my core through his short, but he released my breast from his mouth and jerked my hand away.

“No,” he said firmly. “You can touch my face, hair, shoulders to hold onto something, but that’s it. I said you have to watch.”

He returned to his work at my nipple, and I watched dutifully as he seized it in between his teeth and flicked it quickly with his tongue. I grasped ineffectually at his hair and rolled my hips against his obvious erection, looking for a friction I couldn’t quite access. His fingers continued to alternately tug and pinch at the other nipple until he switched sides again, and they dropped down the taut confines of my stomach to still my hips.

“Easy, baby,” he murmured at my breast. As he closed his mouth back over my nipple and continued to flick his tongue over it, his thumb slipped lower and found the soaked, throbbing nub of my clitoris.

“Aaah!” I cried at the contact, but continued to watch him at my breast, watched his mouth take me in further as his thumb found a rhythm at my core. My hips, as if of their own accord, began to move with the rhythm he was setting with his tongue and his hand, and together we built toward the peak of pleasure I had already experience several times the night before.

“Brandon...” I moaned as he seized my nipple between his teeth and bit again, just hard enough to make me jerk. As I teetered on that delicate edge of pain and pleasure, my orgasm surged up my body. I collapsed and bit his shoulder back while I shook in his arms. He released my breast, but his thumb continued its work, gently rubbing out the rest of my orgasm until my body stopped its shaking.

Lightly, Brandon nipped at my neck, waking me. “Good?” he asked. “I think that was a record.”

“Mmmm,” I groaned. “You’re becoming better at that than I am.”

He shifted beneath me, and I could feel the evidence of his desire still pulsing between my legs.

“Your turn,” I said as I sat back up. I leaned in for a kiss that tasted of coffee and the caramel sweetness of turbinado sugar. With a big arm around my waist, Brandon tugged me flush to his body, returning my kiss until we were both completely out of breath.

“You don’t...I wasn’t trying to...” he muttered as I ineffectually tried to tug down the boxers that he still wore. “Red, aren’t you sore?”

Finally, his cock lay free and heavy in my hands, and I greedily situated myself over it, wincing slightly as I helped him inside. We both sighed with content as he found his place, buried completely within me.

“A little,” I admitted as I helped his shirt off. “But you feel too damn good.”

I moved slightly, allowing him to find a bit of friction in me. His brow furrowed as if in slight pain himself, but his hands clenched at my ass as he pushed himself deeper. He slid his hands up my back and pulled me back down to lay flush against his torso, begging for entry again at my mouth as we started to move together.

“Tell me again,” he murmured against my lips.

“Tell you what?”

“Tell me you love me.”

Oh. I pushed myself slightly up from his chest so I could see his face. The flat plane of his muscle was warm under my hand. I gripped slightly with my fingers and stared straight at him without blinking.

“I love you, Brandon,” I said, softly, but clearly. My heart skipped for a moment—out of fear or passion, I couldn’t tell. Mostly likely a bit of both.

He watched me, shaking slightly as he pressed further into me from below. “Say it again.”

I leaned down so my face hovered above his, so we could breathe in each other’s scents and bask in the warmth of each other’s bodies. The action caused him to pull out of me slightly, and he groaned. His hands floated over the plane of my back, soft and luxurious with their touch.

“I love you,” I whispered again.

With a groan, he yanked me down onto him, forcing me to take him hard, to the hilt. I gasped at the sudden impact, but allowed him to seize my hips and continue the same movement while we watched each other, completely rapt. I

wincing again, and he slowed his movement, watching with obvious sympathy.

“I knew you were sore,” he murmured. He moved me again, this time with less force.

“A little,” I said, but rolled my hips closer, forcing him back in with the same kind of intensity as before. I sucked in a breath. “It hurts, but in a good way.”

“I guess I wore you out last night.”

“Never,” I purred, and leaned back down for another kiss. He rolled his hips, pushing even deeper inside, and I moaned against his lips.

“I can’t,” he breathed into my mouth, as his movements began to pick up. His hands clenched, seeking better purchase on my hips and the flesh of my ass. He groaned, almost as if in pain himself as he thrust again. “God, I can’t stop, Skylar.”

“Don’t.” I pulled at his lip lightly with my teeth and urged him on, pushing my hips down to meet him, thrust for thrust. The pain slowly receded, and very quickly all I could feel was blinding pleasure. “Oh God, Brandon, don’t. Don’t stop!”

“FUCK!” he cried, and we moved frantically, seeking that deep, primal connection that can only be had when both lovers lose themselves completely. I don’t know exactly what happened next. I lost hold of his shoulder, sitting up and closing my eyes so I could only *feel* the deep, penetrating friction of him within me. We shook and cried together, my body writhing atop his while he punished me from below. And at last, with a final cry from both our mouths so guttural and complete that there was nothing left to give, we seized in each

other's arms, quivering and pulsing until there was nothing left to give.

It was only then that I fell back over his shoulder and allowed him to pull me close a second time that morning. His chest still quivered slightly beneath cheek, and our naked skins were slick with a thin sheen of sweat. But he gripped me tightly, unwilling to let me go, unwilling to break the connection.

"Love," he muttered into the tender place between my neck and shoulder where he had buried his face. It wasn't a statement or a proclamation. Just a word that captured the moment.

"Love," I repeated, my voice ragged and worn. "Yes."

~

A slow clap broke our giddy silence from the other side of the room. Jerked out of our post-sex stupor, Brandon and I both scrambled off the lounge, tripping slightly over our naked limbs and grabbed madly for clothes before turning to face the intruder.

"Who the fuck are you?" I yelled, clutching Brandon's wrinkled shirt to my chest and trying to find the armholes without flashing the person.

"Well, you certainly don't waste time, do you?"

The woman who was standing in the kitchen entrance was dressed immaculately in a pale cream suit topped with a camel-colored coat that was too perfect not to be cashmere. Her nearly black tresses were swept back from her angular face into a neat chignon, revealing tasteful pearl and diamond

droplet earrings that matched the massive ring on her finger. She was stunning. She was also a woman I had seen before, outside of Brandon's office only a few short months ago. The one in fur who called him "darling."

"What the fuck, Miranda!" Brandon roared once he had tugged on his boxer shorts and swung his robe around his shoulders.

"It was a nice show, Bran," she said casually, tracing one elegant finger up and down the molding around the doorframe. "Although I can't say it's what I originally intended for that chaise. It's a one of a kind, you know."

"Miranda, what the *fuck* are you doing here?" Brandon asked, this time keeping his voice barely below shouting level. His accent, however, couldn't be hidden at all.

"You haven't been answering my calls," she replied, stepping fully into the kitchen and placing her hands neatly on the marble countertop of the island. "And you blew off our last two appointments with the lawyers. I know you're having a little fun right now, but I really do need those tickets we discussed. Mother is expecting you at the Cape next week, you know. Are you still planning to go?"

"What the hell is going on?" I exploded behind Brandon, having since tugged the ratty shirt over my torso and ducked behind the kitchen island to shield my bare legs. I glared at the woman, who only twisted her perfectly glossed lips into a smirk. "Who are you, and what are you doing in Brandon's house?"

"Ooh, aren't we familiar? Do you want to tell her, Bran, or should I?" she asked sweetly. I glanced at Brandon, who stood

dumbfounded next to lounge, for once unable to speak.

“I’m his wife, sweetie,” she said, standing up fully and dusting her hands off on one another as if she had exposed them to some kind of germ on the immaculate countertop. She looked up, and her brown eyes had all the warmth of a glacier. “This is my house. That’s my lovely furniture you’ve been defiling. And that’s my husband you were just fucking.”

~

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Chapter 37

“Skylar, wait!”

The words fell on deaf ears as I rushed upstairs, only able to hear the roaring of my inner thoughts. I hadn't wasted time to witness any kind of exchange between them, or to allow her to see more of my naked ass longer than it took to beeline out of the room toward the stairs. It took me approximately fifteen seconds to get there, fifteen seconds to feel exactly like a teapot ready to boil.

His wife. The words kept filtering through my ears, like a bad record snagged on repeat. His *wife*? I threw the few things I had brought to the house into my purse, stumbling about his bedroom looking for the rest of my things. Ana had somehow folded and brought my deserted pantsuit upstairs and laid them neatly on the bed, which was now neatly made. Of course it had to be the ugly brown one I'd bought at Daffy's before even graduating college—*of course* that was the suit I'd have to wear while I faced off with Jackie Onassis downstairs, a woman who not only looked like she'd just walked out of *Vogue*, but who also happened to be Brandon's *wife*!

A sob came, hard and fast, landing into the back of my throat and swallowed back as quick. I wasn't going to cry. I was *not* going to cry with that woman here to see. Goddamn it, where was my bra? With a stifled shriek, I realized that if Ana hadn't brought it up, it was probably still lying somewhere in the living room, just a few feet away from where her royal highness was probably standing. The thought only brought

back further memories of the very intimate things he had done to me down there. While he was married. *Fuck.*

With trembled hands, I managed to tug on my slacks and jacket as quickly as I could. I shoved my feet into the sensible brown pumps that I'd bought on clearance at DSW. I would have killed for my Manolos right then.

If I had forgotten anything else, he could fucking have it. I needed to get out of there as soon as possible. I tiptoed back downstairs, grabbed my coat and bag from the closet by the door, and walked out before I had to listen to the argument Brandon and Miranda were obviously having in the kitchen.

The wind picked up as soon as I was outside, sending a blast of sharp, frigid rain into my face as I tugged on my parka. I walked directly against rainstorm, forcing my way out toward the nearest train station. I hardly noticed the inclement weather; all I could think about was how phenomenally stupid I had been.

How could I have not known this? I was soon-to-be a lawyer, for Christ's sake. I knew how to do research, and if any of the client at the clinic had taught me anything, it was that people were capable of all sorts of treachery. People broke the law all the time. People lied. People always had skeletons in about ten different closets. Why would Brandon Sterling be any different? His *Wikipedia* page was obviously edited to omit this very important detail of his life; the only thing it said about his personal life was a list of charities he supported. No doubt a slightly more thorough search would have revealed a wife. Maybe even a family.

Complicated, Kieran had said. *Sometimes a prince is really the devil in disguise*. Christ. While I'd convinced myself that she was supportive of our relationship, she was actually trying to warn me off. She'd yelled at a client about a woman named Miranda just yesterday. Quickly, everything clicked together. Kieran wasn't working on business deals; she was Brandon's divorce lawyer. And she'd watched, pitifully, as I'd been ensnared by a client she knew to be bad news, but about whom she could say nothing.

I choked back another sob. No, I was going to hold this in, wait until I was safely under a hot shower where no one—not even Jane—could witness the immensity of my heartbreak. I focused on the biting wind against my cheeks and the way the race sent icy streams down the collar of my jacket. I picked up my pace, determined to reach the station in record time.

The familiar red and white T sign was only a half-block away when I heard my name rise up out of the breeze. I continued walking, even though I knew it was a lost cause.

“Skylar!” Brandon yelled again. He was clearly out of breath. A hand on my elbow jerked me to a stop, and I took a breath as I whirled to face him.

He had dressed as hastily as I had and had obviously pulled on whatever was most readily available: a pair of jeans, one of his zillions of white undershirts, his worn Red Sox hat, and untied sneakers. He looked nothing like the billionaire lawyer whose face had been on the front page of *Fortune* magazine. Instead, he looked just like any other kid from Boston, albeit a bit out of place without a coat in the middle of a nasty downpour. The thin t-shirt was pasted to his body,

translucent like some kind of frigid version of a wet t-shirt contest. If I hadn't felt so angry, I might have appreciated the way the thin material clung to every square line of his pectorals, every chiseled edge of his abs. He sucked in air like his life depended on it—for him to have gotten dressed and still caught me before I entered the station meant he must have sprinted across the park. For a moment I wanted to throw myself into his big arms and pretend none of this had happened. But only for a moment.

“Fuck off, Brandon,” I spat, turning to walk even faster through the park to where the Park Street T-stop was waiting for me like a beacon. I splashed through puddles, their water soaking the bottoms of my pants up to my calves. Again my arm was tugged backward, and I would have fallen over if Brandon's strong chest hadn't been there to catch me.

“I said fuck off!” I pushed him away from me with as much force as I could manage, although it had little effect on his solid form. “I don't want to talk to you, asshole! What don't you get about that?”

I turned before he could answer and darted down the escalators, thankfully void of people so early on a Saturday morning. I could hear the thud of his footsteps following me, but I ignored him, focused instead on locating my Charlie card from my wallet so I could zip through the turnstiles with ease. Brandon wouldn't have one. If luck was on my side, there would be a train leaving from the multi-line hub before he could purchase one; maybe he had even forgot his wallet.

“Skylar!” he called as I slid my card through the reader without a backward glance. Behind me, I heard a grumble and

a distinct “Fuck it” before a large thump and the sound of feet hitting the pavement. When I turned to check, he was on the other side of the turnstiles, and definitely wasn’t putting anything back in his wallet or pockets.

“So we’re back to this,” he said in between still-heavy gasps. “Chasing you down everywhere you go. I’m starting to feel like I’m training for a marathon.”

“Then stop,” I retorted. “Did you just jump the fucking turnstiles?”

He smirked, which equally made me want smack him and kiss him. “Keep it down, Ms. Goody-goody. What did you expect me to do?”

“I expected you to stop fucking following me and not commit a Class A misdemeanor,” I hissed. A train was just pulling out of the station, and there were no others approaching. Fucking weekend schedule. “You’re probably the richest man in Boston—”

“Third richest, actually.”

“I don’t give a shit,” I bit out. “This ridiculous. I don’t want to fucking talk to you, so just go back home to your *wife*.” I spat out the last word so hard they practically cut my tongue, and inwardly I congratulated myself for keeping my voice from shaking.

Brandon scowled and shivered. His arms were turning a vibrant red from the damp cold, and he rubbed them absently while he sucked in another lungful of icy air. “Skylar,” he said slowly. “Please. You have to let me talk.”

“*Is* she actually your wife?”

He didn't say anything, just continued to rub his triceps and stare down the line at the empty track behind me.

"Right," I said, and strode across the platform toward another track, where I found a seat on one of the worn, empty benches.

Heavy footsteps approached, and I didn't need the signature nutty scent to know who had joined me on the bench. We sat there for a moment in silence, staring down the track into the empty tunnel.

"It's really fucking cold in here," Brandon remarked. For some reason, his nonchalance pissed me off even more.

"Maybe you should go back and get your coat," I sneered. "I'm sure your wife would warm it up for you."

"Goddamn it, Skylar, will you stop?"

I whipped around to glare at him. "Isn't she? Because that's what she said, Brandon. You know, while I was lying naked on top of you. So which is it: is she lying or are you fucking *married*?"

My voice rose with every word, and I couldn't quite stop the crack that broke through "married." Tears rose again, and I did my best to sniff them back, praying that they would disappear before they betrayed me. Brandon stared at me sadly, the crease between his eyebrows more pronounced than usual. Our eyes locked for at least a minute, and I was determined not to look away first. I'd stare the truth out of him if I had to.

Finally, he bit his lower lip and sucked in another deep breath, heaving his broad chest out and in before he opened his

mouth.

“Yes,” he said slowly, not breaking eye contact with me. “She is.” His eyelids shuttered, and he finally looked away.

I stared. The teapot had reached a boil, and for a moment I forgot where I was, who I was. It was true. He was married. I was nothing but a...fuck.

“Skylar?” he interrupted me from the inarticulate mess of my thoughts. I blinked and looked back at him.

“Please,” he said. “Say something.”

Before I knew what I was doing, I reached a hand back and slapped him as hard as I possibly could across the face. I closed my eyes, reveling in the suddenly throbbing of my palm. When I opened them, he was holding one hand to his face with a mixed expression of shock and respect.

“I guess I deserved that,” he said acidically.

“Get the fuck away from me,” I replied, this time not bothering to control the uneven tenor of my voice. “I mean it.”

I stood up, and he stood with me. He reached out a timid hand, which I batted away as I stepped away from the bench.

“I’m serious, Brandon!” I yelled. “Leave me alone!”

“Skylar, stop,” he pleaded as he started toward me, but was interrupted.

“Do you need some help, miss?”

We both swiveled out heads to the right, where three rather large construction workers had approached with concerned looks on their faces. With their beat-up baseball caps and worn out jeans, they looked like they were on their way home from

work. On the Red Line, that meant South Boston, maybe even Dorchester or Quincy. They weren't the kind of guys you messed with, and considering he was from the same part of town, Brandon likely knew that.

I looked back at him.

"Do I?" I asked evenly.

Brandon just stared at me, obvious frustration emanating from his stiff posture and clenched fists. He looked like he wanted to throw down with all three of the guys, sling me over his shoulder, and carry me away as a booty of war. Too bad I would have rather thrown myself on the tracks instead.

Finally, he exhaled slowly and stood up.

"No," he said, and turned to walk toward the exit. With a forlorn look, he pushed back through the turnstiles and jogged back up the escalator and out of the station. Threat neutralized, my impromptu rescue brigade disseminated quickly, walking back to their side of the station while I took another seat on the bench to wait for a train back to Cambridge.

Less than a minute later, my phone buzzed in my pocket as the train approached.

skylar we WILL talk about this

Right, I thought. What was there to talk about? He was married. Which made me a cheap home wrecker and him a philandering asshole. Not much to talk about there.

With a bit too much gusto, I deleted the message and tucked my phone back into my pocket, ignoring the continued buzzing that signified more messages and several missed calls.

He could try all he wanted to talk. I wasn't interested any more.

~

It took me nearly two hours to get home. Too absorbed in the maze of my thoughts to notice the automated announcements of train stops, I stared vacantly under the fluorescent lights all the way to the end of the line, where I had to wait another thirty minutes to catch the return train back to the Harvard Square. I trudged the last ten-minute walk through another horrid downpour to the brick exterior of my apartment building. But I couldn't feel the rain. Brandon's simple admission echoed through my head the whole time as numbed shock replaced the anger I felt, and a deep sadness slipped underneath it all.

I approached the door of my building completely soaked through with my head hanging low. My wool jacket was saturated and dripping, and the stray edges of my hair were plastered to my forehead and chin. There was water in the bottoms of my pumps that made them squish with each step. I noticed none of it. It wasn't until I was pulling my keys from my waterlogged purse that Brandon's familiar voice rang out in the chill.

“Where the hell have you been?”

I snapped my head up. He was standing with his back against the glass doors of the building, arms crossed in front of his expansive chest, and frown fixed on his face. He had obviously gone home and changed—while he still wore his jeans and Red Sox cap, he had replaced his t-shirt with a fleece and raincoat, his running shoes with waterproofed boots. He

wore black knit gloves, and his head was still covered with his trusty Red Sox cap, from under which I could see the edges of his hair curling in the humidity. He had obviously come prepared to wait in the wet, despite the presence of his driver and Mercedes at the curb. The only thing that betrayed any discomfort was the way the tip of his nose was tinged pink, matching the ruddy tone of his cheeks. He looked cold. And he also looked really, irritatingly fuckable.

The numbness I had developed disappeared, replaced once again with anger.

“I told you to leave me alone,” I said in a low voice. “I need some space, Brandon.”

“I give you space, Red, somehow I’m guessing I’ll never hear from you again,” he said, pushing off the door. “That’s not gonna cut it for me.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you don’t have a choice,” I said, looking over his shoulder toward the building entrance. “You need to stop chasing me.”

I feigned right and tried to dodge around him to the left, but he moved with me, forcing me to look at him in the eye.

“I’ll *never* stop chasing you,” he said fervently. “You can believe that.”

“You sound like a stalker!” I protested.

“I sound like a man in love!” he yelled back.

I stepped back, shocked by his outburst. Usually I was the one who spouted off.

“Don’t look at me as if last night didn’t happen, Skylar,” he warned me, a gloved finger pointing at me furiously. “I’m fucking crazy about you, and you’re crazy about me too. From the goddamn second I found you sitting in my house, I’ve been acting like a complete lunatic, and I can’t do a thing to stop it! You’ve got me wrapped around your little finger, and you don’t even know it. But you know what? I know you feel it too. I *know* you do.”

“So what if I do!” I burst out, dropping my purse on the wet ground as I flung my arms out to the side. My ponytail came loose, and wet snakes of copper-colored hair flew into my face. I brushed them away furiously. “You’re fucking *married!* You’re unavailable, yet you pursued me, over and over again, broke down every barrier I had, mentally and physically. Fucked me senseless all over your pretty little mansion until your wife shows up. Do you know what that makes me, Brandon?”

“Don’t say it...” he warned, shifting back and forth on his boots and tugging anxiously on the bill of his cap.

“It makes me the other woman, Brandon,” I said flatly. “But since we hardly know each other and you insist on throwing money at me all the time, really it just makes me your whore.”

“Goddammit, I said don’t say it!” he bellowed, yanking the cap off and throwing it onto the sidewalk. Several students peered down curiously from the windows above us, and I suddenly wanted to get into my apartment as soon as I could.

“Where are you going?” Brandon asked sharply as I picked my wet bag off the pavement and turned toward the

door. “We’re not finished here. Do want me screaming up at the window like a Tennessee Williams character? Because don’t think I won’t go all Marlon Brando on you, Red.”

“*Don’t call me that!*” I shrieked as I whirled back around. I gulped in a breath, surprised by the intensity of my response. For some reason, his casual use of my nickname under these circumstances caused almost as much pain as everything else. I glanced up at the heads still watching from their windows; most of them popped back inside, but I knew they were still listening.

“Have it your way,” I said through gritted teeth. “If we’re going to scream at each other, we’re going to do it where my classmates can’t stare at us. And where I can get some dry clothes. Come on.”

Brandon bent down to retrieve his now-soaked cap and balled the worn fabric in one hand as he worried the bill in the other. “Lead the way.”

~

Chapter 38

A quick text to Jane confirmed that she was thankfully studying at the library, and would be for most of the day. While I definitely wanted her as a sounding board at some point, there were some conversations to finish first.

With heavy feet that scraped the thin, battered carpets of the building, Brandon followed me into the empty apartment. Only a few cold, gray rays stole through the blinds while the rainstorm outside continue to batter the window panes, setting a gloomy film noir mood that fit the situation. I shut the door and flipped on the lights, carefully avoiding Brandon's gaze as I removed my coat and shoes.

I set my leather bag, which I now figured for ruined, on the table. I stood there for a moment, studying the tabletop, while Brandon, who had taken a seat on the couch, watched nervously.

"I'm going to take a shower," I announced abruptly, suddenly desperate to get out of my sopping clothes. The tight, wet denim chafed around my hips and thighs; my socks were essentially sponges.

"Alone?"

I snapped my head up to find Brandon's sly half-smile soaking the room with charisma. I frowned. The smile disappeared.

"Yes," I said curtly. "Stay there. I'll be out when I'm out."

Maybe it was the opportunity to delay the inevitably awful conversation waiting for me on the couch, but my shower felt

like I was readying myself for battle. I took my time about it, reshaving my legs and underarms, letting my conditioner for an extra five minutes, scrubbing down every inch of my body twice with the jasmine-scented soap I saved for special occasions. When I got out, I went over my eyebrows with a tweezer and spent another thirty minutes putting on just the right amount of makeup and blow-drying my hair into wild waves that rioted around my face like a lion's mane. I wanted to feel powerful and free. Severe, but not necessarily polished. In my room I pulled my favorite black sweater and a pair of light gray corduroys that fit me like second skin. Comfortable, but dark enough to fit my mood.

Brandon still on the couch, facing our nonworking fireplace with his boots kicked off. He had removed his coat and hung it next to mine with his hat. In his plain t-shirt and jeans, he looked more like a student than I did.

"You look nice," he said, looking me up and down as I walked in. Despite the compliment, all traces of flirtation were gone. "I like your hair like that."

I looked down at my outfit and then back at him. "Thanks. I'm going to make a pot of tea if you want any." My tone was similarly devoid of kindness that should have matched the courtesy of my offer.

"Sure," he said cautiously. "Whatever you're having is fine."

Knowing he watched my every move, I did my best to ignore him as I set the water to boil and dug through the cabinet for my favorite black tea. I removed the small tray Jane and I kept above the refrigerator and loaded it up with

two mugs, honey, spoons, and a small pitcher of milk. By the time the kettle whistled, all I had to do was pour it over the tea leaves in the pot and let it steep as I carried everything over to the coffee table in front of the couch.

“Thanks, Skylar. This is really nice.”

Continuing to ignore him, I went about pouring myself a mug full of the deep black liquid and mixing it with honey and milk. I liked my tea strong, sweet, and approximately the color of butter caramels. Brandon followed my model, but it was clear by his awkward movements—the clash of his spoon against the porcelain mug, the way he dripped both honey and milk onto the tray—that he wasn’t used to fixing his own beverages. *Typical*, I thought ungraciously. I made no move to help him, just sat back in the small college-issued armchair next to the couch with my feet curled under me, mug clasped between my palms.

Before he sat back, he pulling a wad of crumpled papers from his back pocket and set them on the coffee table next to the tea with a solid thump. We both stared at them for a moment before he sat back too. Our sips echoed through the room. Although I was determined not to break the standoff, my impatience got the best of me after a few minutes had passed.

“What’s that?” I asked quietly, nodding at the papers.

“My divorce agreement. Or it was until this morning. Now she won’t sign.”

The accusation wasn’t explicitly there, but I felt it anyway. Something had been ruined the second that woman had walked in on me and Brandon.

“What—”

“We’re separated,” Brandon cut me off. “We’ve been legally separated for over three years, since I originally filed for divorce.” He glanced over his mug with a raised eyebrow. “I’ll show you them if you want, Red—I’m mean, Skylar. We could look online right now.”

“Maybe when we’re done,” I replied woodenly. We took a few more loud sips of tea, each of us waiting for the other to speak. Once again, I was the first to break.

“Three years is a long time to be just separated,” I remarked. He knew what I meant. As in, *why aren’t you divorced yet?*

Brandon sighed. “She doesn’t want a divorce. We never had a prenup...I know, I know, but we were kids when we got married. I wasn’t worth much, and I was an idiot. And now, she wants half of it all. It’s not that I mind paying her off, but I’d either have to dissolve a bunch of my assets, which would mean a lot of people losing their jobs, or I would have to make her an executive board member of Sterling Ventures, which I’m absolutely not going to do.” He ran a hand through his hair, causing one side to stick out. “Thank God the company isn’t public yet. Then it would be a real fuckin’ mess.”

I bit my lip, considering the thick stack of papers on the table. “Because a three-year divorce isn’t a mess.”

He looked up with a wry smirk. “It’s never been tidy, that’s for sure.”

I sighed and sat forward to set my mug on the table. “So what happened? Why did you file for divorce?”

He stared down at his mug, still almost completely full—it was clear he wasn't actually much of a tea drinker. Ana made him coffee every morning.

“Miranda’s father owned a fund where I got my first job out of college. The one I told you about, where I made my first bit of cash for Ray and Susan. The story I told you is true...but that’s not all I was doing back then.” He looked up, his expression regretful. “You’re probably not going to like this other story, Skylar.”

I twisted my lips to the side. “Well, I don’t like you very much right now anyway, so you might as well spill. It can’t get much worse.”

Brandon snorted. “We’ll see.”

He set his mug down on the coffee table and then sat back in the couch, bracing his hand on the arm tightly, like he was passenger preparing for a collision.

“Like I told you before, I originally started working part time at the fund, learning the investment game. But I was still only a teenage shit, and when I was finished at MIT, part of me gravitated back to the old neighborhood. I don’t know why, maybe to prove something to myself, like that I hadn’t sold out my roots for some money and a fancy degree or some bullshit like that. I caught a lot of flak from neighbors when I chose to stay with the Petersens, like I told you. So maybe I was trying to make up for that. I don’t really know. Anyway, when I wasn’t at the fund, I was usually getting into trouble down south.”

“What kind of trouble?” My voice was strangely calm, but a red flag was waving internally. Considering my dad’s

struggles with minor criminal activities, I had no desire to come anywhere near Boston's seedy underground or anyone else who did. When Brandon mentioned his friends to Messina, I had thought he was bluffing, just naming a few names to ingratiate himself. Maybe not.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Stupid kid stuff. Fights, mostly, and hustling billiards. Standard young hooligan shit."

The pool table set up in his house suddenly made more sense. Although it had obviously hardly been used, the room was like an open invitation to his old gang of friends who, for whatever reason, never accepted the offer.

"So what happened next?" I asked.

Brandon rubbed his face as if he were in physical pain, but continued. "So that was my life: trading by day, hustling at night. I was kind of a wunderkind at the firm, and Stan—that's Miranda's dad—liked me. Took me six months to double his holdings, so he didn't give a shit that I showed up hungover half the time or in the same wrinkled suit as the night before. After my first year was up, he promoted me to a vice-president position, and that's when I met Miranda."

He had met his ex-wife at a company mixer held on Stanley Keith's expansive estate in Chestnut Hill. All of the fund managers brought their families for the afternoon shindig, which was typical New England, right down to the white wine spritzers and croquet games for the kiddies. All the men wore khaki pants and polo shirts; the women wore pearls. And Brandon had shown up half-drunk after a late night at the billiards hall in jeans and a t-shirt.

“Miranda thought I was some asshole on the catering staff, come late to the party, and started chewing me out for it.”

He smiled ruefully, looking over my shoulder at some invisible memory. I curled smaller into my chair.

“She didn’t get along with her old man. They fought like crazy, and she was at that age when all she wanted to do was piss him off just to do it. So when I told her to go fuck herself, she yanked me into the kitchen pantry and had her way with me. It wasn’t until she dragged me out to show her dad what she’d done that she found out I actually worked for the bastard and was probably one of his most valuable employees.”

I grimaced, not wanting to imagine him with the angel-faced woman I’d seen today, but finding myself doing so all too easily. She was everything I wasn’t: tall and lithe, delicate-boned with skin like porcelain. Genteel. And very beautiful. In her early twenties she must have been stunning.

“But I was still from far enough on the other side of town to be the bad boy she needed,” Brandon continued, pulling me from my thoughts. “I didn’t give a shit about anything in those days—not my life, not the world around me, and certainly not Stan Keith. We served a mutual purpose for each other—she was a distraction for me, and I was her way of getting her father’s attention.”

“But she fell in love with you?” The words clipped at my heart as I said them, but I could see where the story was going. It was a damn Billy Joel song. Uptown girl falls in love with a boy from the wrong side of the tracks and tries to make him over.

Brandon nodded regretfully. “Unfortunately, yes. And as fucked up as I was, Skylar, all I knew was that it felt really good to have someone like Miranda—someone who was beautiful, who came from a good family, a person of substance—love me. She knew where I was from and she still loved me. Maybe she even loved me because of where I was from.”

I could see it. I didn’t like it, but I could see it. Brandon had struggled all his life for approval, still so clearly yearned for the kind of unconditional love he should have gotten as a kid. I could completely understand how at nineteen or twenty he’d confused the way a girl made him feel about himself with genuine love for her. But was that my own assumptions talking? I didn’t really want to know the truth, but I had to ask.

“Did you love her back?” My voice was soft, with a slight waver.

He shook his head, his eyes full of pain. “Poor Miranda. Sometimes I think Stan was the real genius. He knew I was no good from the get-go, but I wonder if that’s why he actually encouraged my relationship with his daughter. He knew I’d fuck up enough one day to the point I’d need him and his family to get me out of trouble, indebting me and my brain to him for good. All he needed to do was wait and use his daughter to move me into the right position.”

It didn’t take long. After dating Miranda for six months or so, trouble found him and his Dorchester crew when a billiards game went bad.

“We got cocky, even though we were starting to get attention. For me, I didn’t give a shit if we made money at that point—I was only doing it for kicks, you know? And when we

started to gain a rep, I was ready to bow out. But some of the guys were starting to depend on it, especially the ones who couldn't hold down a job. So we kept doing it, even though we knew better.”

One night he and his friends were challenged at their regular pool hall by an unknown player named Ricky O'Neill, who himself showed up clearly looking to hustle. When Brandon beat him, Ricky lost his temper and pulled a knife. He left after the bar owner tossed them all out, but that wasn't the end of it.

Brandon leaned forward over his knees as if to focus. His accent had been thickening steadily the entire time he'd been telling his story—now it was noticeably strong.

“Later that night, when we're all hanging at Mickey and Doug's place, there's this knock at the front door. We all look at each other, knowing this ain't good news, since it's fuckin' three in the morning. We're drunk, of course, and before we get our act together enough to duck out the back, the door busts open and Ricky comes chargin' in with five other guys, all of 'em Westies.”

Ricky ended up being a member of the now-defunct West End gang, the criminal group headed up by Whitney Bulgar in the eighties. They didn't do much now, but those who still ran around did pay homage to local Mafia and even to some of the heads in New York.

I shivered. “So what happened?”

Brandon bowed his head, speaking into his palms. “About what you'd expect. They had guns, we had a few too. They

killed my friend John, but we got Ricky before the cops showed up and we all had to bail out the back alley.”

They had run away from the two dead bodies lying in the ramshackle apartment in Field’s Corner, but the cops had caught up with two of the men from Ricky’s crew, and both of them had sang like canaries under the pressure of mild interrogation.

“Did you kill—”

“No,” Brandon said flatly. He looked up, eyes unblinking and hard. “No. I promise you that, Skylar, I never killed anyone. But I did throw a few punches, and I was definitely a witness, you know? Or an aid to murder, depending on which side of the prosecution you’re on.”

Suddenly chilled, I pulled a blanket from the back of my chair and settled it around my waist, kneading the soft knit fabric in my hands. “So what happened next?”

“Well, Stan got what he wanted. While Doug and Mickey had to make do with burnt out public defenders, Stan bankrolled my criminal defense. In exchange, of course, for a ten-year contract at the fund and non-compete agreement for just as long if I was fired.”

“Ray and Susan couldn’t help?”

Brandon shook his head. “Ray’s a poor professor and Susan doesn’t work. No, they couldn’t help, but honestly, they were fed up with my shit by that point anyway. So when Stan stepped in, I would have been a fool to say no. But here’s the real kicker: he didn’t just pay for the lawyer. He had Miranda act as my alibi.”

He looked up at me, and fine lines around his eyes suddenly seemed more evident. I gripped the blanket, resisting the urge to go and wrap my arms around his shoulder, pull his head into my lap, and smooth the anguish that was so clear across his rugged features. But I needed to hear the rest of this story. So I stayed put.

“It wasn’t right,” Brandon continued. “I know that. He traded his daughter for the promise of millions in revenue. He knew what I could do better than I did. But I was nineteen, and for the first time in my life, really fucking scared. My friends were too good to rat me out, and Miranda’s alibi made the Westies’ testimonies sound like petty gang rivalry. I didn’t want to get locked up, so I let her cover for me and I signed the agreement. And while my two best friends got time—Doug got two and a half years for assault with intent while Mickey got stuck with twenty for voluntary manslaughter—I got off scot-free.”

Well, that explained why he didn’t go see any of them anymore. He’d told Victor that they were both still in jail—Doug must have done something else after getting out the first time.

“So you married her because she served as your alibi.” I stated the obvious, considering it as a I swirled the small bit of tea still left in my mug.

Brandon leaned back in his seat, the tension in his shoulders releasing now that the story had almost come to an end. “In a way, I guess I did. It’s hard to explain that kind of debt if you’ve never had it. And I seemed to make her happy, especially when I quit hanging out in Dorchester and decided

to go to law school with Stan's blessing. So when she started talking marriage a few years in, I said okay. We had a big affair at Cape Cod. Big white tent, the works. She looked like a princess, and I was the frog dressed like a prince." He paused, caught up again in the memories. "It seemed like the right thing to do."

"How old were you then?"

"Twenty-three."

I could see him clearly: fourteen years ago, before he'd quite learned the veneer and polish that wealth brought, trussed up in a tuxedo that hung from a slightly lankier frame. I also had no problem envisioning Miranda in a Vera Wang confection, carrying pristine peonies and tipping champagne with equally pristine guests. It was a world I could only imagine from movies and novels—never one I'd ever known, or even wanted, myself. I wondered if, despite his initial desire to escape the threat of the poverty of his youth, Brandon had ever really wanted that kind of opulence too. The kind of opulence that now characterized his life.

"But it didn't last." I spoke quietly, more to myself than to him.

He looked up from where he was studying the edge of the sofa. "No," he said. "It didn't."

I didn't say anything, just waited for him to finish the story. He sighed and kept going.

"Stan died about five years after the wedding, of pancreatic cancer. Just after instating me as the president of the fund. He signed the business over to me before he died, a sort

of mea culpa, I guess, so it wasn't a part of what he willed Miranda or her mother. By that point I was ready for the challenge. When he died, I disintegrated the hedge fund and used the capital to start my own shop. Miranda...well, she liked the money, but she didn't like the hours. And when it became apparent that she couldn't have kids, well...she didn't like that either. But she's Catholic, so not as much as she didn't like divorce."

After trying everything short of adoption, they had agreed somewhat tacitly to live their own lives apart while maintaining the pleasant veneer of their marriage to the public. Miranda spent most of her time in the penthouse in New York, only coming back to Boston for family functions or occasionally to see Brandon. I filed that fact aside. Brandon made it seem like the fire had gone out between them long ago—or maybe never been there to begin with—but it was obvious to me that Miranda Sterling née Keith still was and always had been in love with her husband.

Brandon, on the other hand, stayed at the house on Beacon Street and continued to invest most of his energy into the firms, which had quickly blossomed into some of the top law and investment companies on the East Coast. They had gone on like that for at least six or seven years, which was surprisingly easy to believe, given the somewhat lonely feel of the townhouse and the hours he kept.

I set my mug down on the coffee table and sighed. As angry as I was to find that he had a wife, I couldn't help sympathize with his situation more and more. In the time we had spent together, I had firsthand knowledge of just what kind of passion, kindness, and dedication that Brandon was

capable of giving. I could hardly blame another woman for seeing that in him. It was part of what had made me fall in love with him too.

Jesus. The word rang through my head with the subtlety of a church bell. Love. We had said it to each other only last night, and he had shouted it in front of half of my law school classmates on the street minutes before. The words had been spontaneous, and I hadn't yet processed exactly what they meant. But as soon as I looked up at met Brandon's eyes, which implored me for forgiveness with such obvious desperation, I knew that I was still as head over heels as I'd ever been. There was no way I couldn't love this man, history and all.

The thought was terrifying. Gripping the blanket to keep myself from launching at him, instead I urged him to finish the story. "So what happened next?"

Brandon leaned back into the couch again and clapped his hands together over his stomach.

"Everything and nothing, if you know what I mean. I was having dinner with Ray and Susan one night. Susan made this roasted chicken, which is Ray's all-time favorite thing to eat on the planet. They aren't the most affectionate people—certainly weren't with me either, as you know—but I remember when she set it down in front of him, he gave her this look, and she blushed about ten shades of red." Brandon smirked. "About the same as your hair."

I reached behind me and chucked a throw pillow at him, which he caught easily and laid in his lap like nothing had happened.

“Anyway,” he continued. “I just remember thinking that I was never going to do that with Miranda. She’d never make me a chicken that made me heat up inside—she might have loved me, but I don’t even think she knows what my favorite meal is—and I’d never look at her with that kind of love.”

“What is it?” I found myself asking. “Your favorite meal?”

He looked up with a shy smile that had me once again trying very hard not to launch myself at him.

“Eggplant parmesan,” he said softly with a slight quirk of the mouth. “With extra mozzarella. You?”

“Matzo ball soup,” I said. “The kind my Bubbe makes, or from the B & H if you can’t get her recipe. It’s the ultimate comfort food.”

“I’ll remember that.”

We stared at each other unblinking for another few moments, unable to fight the heat growing between us.

“Right,” I said, finally tearing my gaze away from his baby blues. “Continue.”

Brandon sighed, obviously ready to be done with the story. “Well, that was pretty much that. I was thirty-four, eleven years into a sham marriage, and ready to be done with it. I asked her for a divorce, but she said no. We’ve been arguing over a settlement ever since, but I didn’t press the matter much until recently. We were supposed to have our final mediation with the lawyers on Monday.” He looked up with a particularly forlorn expression. “She was going to sign the papers.”

It was obvious why he wouldn't just go to court with it. Aside from the fact that it would drag both their names through the mud, there was always the risk that Miranda would withdraw her alibi from years back. Though the statute of limitations had run out on the charges of assault, the damage it would do to Brandon's reputation—not to mention any hope of taking the Sterling Ventures public—was likely insurmountable. There was also the probability that he would be charged with giving a false statement, or possibly perjury. And just when things were about to be finished for them, she walked in on us at the house. Talk about shit luck.

I looked back at the divorce papers, now creased and rippled around the edges after drying out.

“The deal that Kieran was working on...” I murmured, a light suddenly dawning on me.

Brandon nodded ruefully, agreeing with my line of logic. “Yeah. She's in family law; you know that. She's mad because I haven't been playing nice lately.”

“Because of me?” My voice was small. I didn't want to be the reason he was getting into trouble again. But this, combined with my family's issues...

“Because of us,” Brandon said just as softly. “You make me believe I can have what Ray and Susan have. You make me believe I can have love, Skylar, real love. And for the first time, I've wanted to fight for it.”

A thick silence fell over the room while his last words echoed between us. We stared at each other, blue eyes to green, each of us trying to make sense of where the other stood.

I sighed, stood up, and shook out my blanket before folding it back up and laying it neatly on the chair. When I turned around, I found Brandon motionless, still watching me nervously as if he wasn't sure what I was going to do next. It was clearly my turn to talk, and he knew my response to his revelations probably wouldn't be good.

But when I opened my mouth to say what we both knew I should—that it was too much, that we couldn't see each other anymore—only two words came out:

“I'm sorry.”

~

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Chapter 39

“*You’re* sorry?” Brandon head snapped up from his seat on the couch. He ran both hands back to front through his hair, which now resembled the back of a porcupine. He did it two more times, enhancing the effect. “Jesus, Skylar, *why?*”

His voice cracked on the last word. Suddenly, I couldn’t be close to him fast enough. I tackled him back onto the couch, and his surprised arms encircled me automatically as I straddled his waist and burrowed into his strong form. I leaned my head on his chest and closed my eyes, relishing the warmth of his skin, the familiarity of his scent, the steady thump of his heart.

“I’m sorry for what you’ve gone through. For what you are going through. I’m sorry for leaving before you could explain and for never really giving you a chance to tell me these things.”

He shook his head against me, but gripped me tighter against him when I tried to pull away.

“No,” he said, his voice muffled through the masses of my hair. He moved so his chin was hooked over my shoulder, freeing his mouth. “No. You have *nothing* to be sorry for. I should have been straight with you long ago. But the thing is, Red...”

He then pressed me gently away from him so he could look at me in the face.

“Can I call you Red again?” he asked with another shy, hopeful smile.

I could almost smile back, but not quite. I was almost ready to forgive him, but that didn't mean I wasn't hurt by his secrecy. "I...Okay."

Brandon reached up and toyed with a strand of my hair, curling it around and around one finger before letting it fall next to my face.

"The thing is, Red...is that I'm so fucking in love with you. I've been in love with you since...Christ, probably since the first moment I saw you, and definitely since you walked out of my office. I've never wanted anything more in my life than when you told me to fuck myself." He chuckled at the memory, but then grew serious. "And even though I don't ever want to have anything between us again, I probably would have done a lot worse than hide a few things to keep you in my life."

The look on my face must have shown my dismay, which had Brandon shaking his head at me as he clasped my cheeks with both hands.

"No more secrets, baby," he said, pulling me down so our foreheads touched. "That's a promise. They might be easier sometimes than the truth, but I can't live a lie any more, and I definitely can't live without you. Do you believe me?"

We breathed in each other's spaces for what seemed like forever before I finally nodded infinitesimally.

Brandon exhaled deeply. "Thank Jesus fucking Christ," he breathed before pulling my lips down to his.

I hadn't realized until his tongue touched mine how badly I wanted to erase the morning from memory, how much I

wanted to sink into him and forget everything else. I returned his kiss with all the pent up emotions dying for release, unable to get deep enough as I clawed at his neck and ground my hips against him. He slid his hands under my ass and stood in one graceful motion, as if I weighed little more than one of the throw pillows.

“Need you,” he grunted against my lips in between long, deep kisses. “Inside you. So bad. Right. Now.”

He hiked me up his waist while I kept my mouth firmly attached to his, and started walking us down the hallway to the bedrooms. His foot kicked my door open with a heavy bang.

We couldn't get our clothes off fast enough, but couldn't stop kissing each other either. Keeping our mouths fused, Brandon tore off my sweater and ripped at my pants while I yanked his belt away and wrenched his t-shirt over his head. We tripped over our limbs, our shoes, our clothes, laughing in between furious lunges back to one another after even a sliver of separation. When we were finally naked, he tackled me onto the bed, covering my small body with his big, warm one, pressing his hard length into my already drenched sex with one hard thrust.

“Skylar!” he cried as he entered me roughly. “Jesus, baby, you're so tight!”

But this wasn't a time for dirty talk, or any kind of talk at all. Brandon's mouth anxiously found mine again as he started to move within me. A big hand reached under my ass, lifting my leg up and around his hip so he could get leverage to go deeper, move closer. Intentionally or not (I couldn't see how it was, lost as we were in other), the edge of his pelvic bone

rubbed against the sensitive skin covering my clit, creating a delicious friction only further enhanced by the frenzy of our movements. The combination of his unforgiving thrusts with the tortuous stimulation was automatic—I cried out into his mouth as the rise of my orgasm started to mount, fast and hard.

“Brandon,” I moaned, gripping his thick curls and moving my hips unconsciously with the demanding rhythm he set. “I...I...”

What I wanted to say, I didn’t know. All I felt was him, all I wanted was him, body, mind, soul. I grasped at his shoulder, his neck, his back, unable to find purchase to get as close as I wanted. It was all too much, too much to handle or comprehend. More than any other time we had been together, I was genuinely losing my ability to think straight.

“Tell me, baby,” he demanded against my ear, continuing with the unforgiving pace as he pulled the lobe between his teeth.

He groaned as I squeezed around him, both of my legs clenching about his waist, urging him deeper and deeper as I hurtled closer to the edge.

“Tell me what you feel,” he huffed. “Not what you think. What you feel.”

“I...” My orgasm came, fast and sharp, with his next hard, deep plunge into me. “Oh, holy mother of God, Brandon, I LOVE YOU!”

I shouted it over and over again, my body convulsing under him as he continued with his relentless pace.

“SKYYyyylar!” Brandon cried his own release as he buried his face in my neck, his hand clutching my hip hard enough to leave a bruise while he rolled out the rest our mutual oblivion. Gasping for breath, we gripped each other until the waves finally faded.

Eventually my consciousness returned. I could barely register the mess thrown about the room, the sweat rolling down our bodies from our effort, the way my skin stuck to his as I was trapped beneath his chest, where his heartbeat raced against mine. The air surrounding us had become cloyingly humid in the heat of our passion. I couldn't move; I didn't want to.

Finally, Brandon was able to push onto his forearms and look down at me, his face flushed from exertion. His eyes, however, had lost that petrified look he'd walked in with. All I saw was love.

He leaned in with a soft, yet thorough kiss before he gently pulled out. Like a bear moving lazily toward hibernation, he clambered up toward the pillows at the head of the bed, tugging me with him until we were settled under my thin comforter. I was tucked securely into the crook of one arm, my head on his broad, firm chest and his hand rubbing absent circles into my back.

We lay like that for several minutes, slowly coming down from the high of the quick, fierce joining. Just as I was about to doze off, he murmured into my hair.

“Tell me,” he said, his voice gentle but cut through with longing. “Tell me again. Please.”

I blinked slowly, unable to keep my eyes open as I nuzzled further into his neck. I knew exactly what he wanted me to say, and I knew I couldn't keep it back, no matter what it might cost me in the end. "I do. I love you, Brandon."

He hummed, low and content in his chest as he squeezed me close and inhaled from the top of my hair. We both began to drift off, the two of us protected temporarily in the cocoon of warmth and knowledge we had built out of strife.

~

The sun was already low through the blinds when I woke up again, which meant that it was nearly five o'clock. We had slept most of the afternoon away. I felt like I could sleep the rest of the night too. Brandon snored indelicately, and I took that to mean I could slide out from his death grip in order to get a glass of water and rinse off the sticky residue of sex. I snagged the thin cotton robe I kept hanging on the back of my door and slipped out of the room, padding down the hall to where I found Jane reading on the couch.

"Hey, there, Missy," she said, looking up from her book. "Sleeping late today?"

I shrugged. "We...fell asleep. After. You know."

She grinned at me. "We? Is there a wee tycoon napping in your bed, my dear?"

As if on cue, a very loud snore erupted from the direction of my bedroom, causing Jane and I to burst into a fit of hushed giggles. I stumbled over to the sink and poured myself a glass of water, which I downed in a single go.

“Worked yourself up a thirst, I see,” Jane remarked, watching me. “Good for you.”

“Ah, Jane.” I quickly washed the glass and set it in our small dish rack to dry before turning to face her. “It’s so messed up. He’s...shit, he’s *married*.”

She frowned, but showed no signs of surprise. “You didn’t know that?”

I threw up both hands in frustration. “No, I didn’t know that. I didn’t want to cyberstalk the guy, okay?”

“Well, it’s hardly cyberstalking when he’s a public figure. Besides, everyone runs a Google search on new dates. Bosses too, come to think of it.”

I glared at her. “Well, I don’t. Or didn’t. You didn’t think to mention it?”

Jane bared her teeth in mild shame. “I thought, you know, it was one of those topics. You knew, you made the choice to be with him anyway. Really, who am I to judge who you want to pork?”

I shook my head and leaned back against the counter. There was nothing to be done about it now. “Whatever. So I didn’t know. It doesn’t change anything between us.” I sounded more certain than I felt.

Jane shrugged and tapped her pen absently on the edge of her book. “Well, he is separated. He filed, what, three years ago now?”

“How do you know that?” I demanded.

She shrugged. “Page Six, I think. Plus, he left his new divorce papers sitting here.” She gestured toward the creased mass of papers Brandon had left on the coffee table when he’d walked in. “It’s not that big of a deal, is it? I mean, considering how loaded he is, I’m not surprised it’s taking him forever to reach a settlement. Especially since there was no prenup.”

Checking again for the sound of Brandon’s low snores, I padded over to where Jane sat and sank into the couch with a defeated grunt.

“It’s just so fucking complicated,” I said as I rubbed ferociously at my temples. “She walked in on us at his house. We were...getting busy in the kitchen, if you know what I mean. And...I think she watched. We didn’t know she was there until it was over.”

“Oh, Jesus!” Jane erupted into another mass of giggles, much to my disapproval.

“It’s not funny!” I protested with a light smack to her upper arm. “I was so pissed. I feel kind of violated by it, if you want to know the truth. So I ran out of there, but he followed me back here and made me listen to the whole sordid story. And by the end...he tells me he loves me and then he makes love to me—or fucks me, I’m not really sure which—and I say I love you back...but I don’t really know if I can handle this, Jane! It’s just...so much, you know?”

Jane had stopped giggling, and scooted over to the side of the couch closer to the chair, where she could reach out and pat me reassuringly on my leg.

“Oh, hon,” she said. “Yeah, it definitely sucks. I’m so sorry, babe. Really. What are you going to do?”

With another glance in the direction of the snore steadily coming from my room, I shook my head. “I don’t know,” I said honestly. “I do love him. And I forgive him, for the most part. I mean, I sort of get why he didn’t tell me about everything.”

It was the truth, but a niggling voice inside reminded me of the soul-wrenching revelations I’d made to him. Of my own accord. Brandon knew the worst parts of my past, about Patrick, about my dad’s embarrassing history.

I sighed. “I don’t know if it’s enough, you know?”

Jane nodded again and patted my leg sympathetically a few more times before sitting back with her books. Like any good friend, she knew when to interfere and when to give me the space to sort things out.

“I will say one thing, Sky,” she said as she picked up the textbook she had been reading before. “I like him. Or maybe I should say, I like who you are with him. You’re...warmer, I guess. And in the last few months, you’ve seemed happier than I’ve seen you in the last three years. Don’t take that lightly, and don’t make your decision when you’re still upset. At least sleep on it. You’ve had a hard day. Give it a little time.”

I sat there for a moment, mulling over her words along with the other thoughts cycling through my mind. Finally, I nodded and stood back up. “Okay. I’m going to jump in the shower and then wake up the wee tycoon for some dinner. Maybe talking about the weather over a plate of pasta will convince me that my boyfriend isn’t actually married to someone else.”

“I’ll head back to the library, give you kids some space,” Jane said as she leaned over to gather her books together. I almost told her not to bother, but I realized just how much I didn’t want to go back to the house on Beacon Street.

“Thanks,” I said, and padded back down the hall to the bathroom for a shower.

~

I stood under the shower head for what might have been minutes, but what felt like an hour. I let the hot water stream over my naked body, washing all vestiges of the last twenty-four hours away despite the fact that their purveyor was asleep in my bedroom. Mentally, I felt like I had been run over by a bus, and I reveled in the feeling of the hot steam soothing my aching head.

What a goddamn clusterfuck of a situation. It had occurred to me while Brandon was telling his story that perhaps Miranda’s alibi was covering for more than just assault with intent. He never said who actually killed Ricky O’Neill, only that his friends were doing time for it. Had he lied to me about that too? There was no statute of limitations for murder in Massachusetts. If Miranda recanted her alibi, would the state reopen the case?

I shook my head under the stream of hot water. No, there would have had to be evidence of his presence and involvement with the crime, most likely with the murder weapon. Either an actual witness to the crime, fingerprints on the weapon, or something equally condemning. But if that were the case, there’s no way the state’s attorney would have declined to prosecute just because of Miranda’s alibi.

Besides, I told myself, Brandon Sterling wasn't a killer. A poor kid in rich clothing, okay. A reformed hustler, sure. But he wasn't the type who could shoot someone in cold blood. I closed my eyes and imagined his gentle, yet strong features looking at me, blue eyes full of the yearning I knew came from a lifetime without true affection. Parents who had clearly never treated him with the love and attention any child deserved. Foster parents who treated him with curious disinterest despite good intentions. Even when he got married, it obviously wasn't because of love, but because the boss's daughter was infatuated and her daddy wanted to keep his talent for making money in the family.

My heart ached at the thought of a young teenage Brandon roaming the streets of South Boston with his gang of troublemaking compatriots because they were the closest thing to family he could find. I'd seen enough of that type back home. Their friendly fist bumps and encouraging slaps on the back were likely the kindest physical contact he'd received. No wonder he couldn't forgive himself for letting them go to prison while he took the easy out.

I sighed heavily as I let the water run over my face. It was still a giant mess, and even though I felt like I knew—and even loved—Brandon better for it, I wasn't sure I could handle the aftermath of whatever was going to happen next. Jane had told me to sleep on it, but the truth was, I already had. Things already seemed different, even after five hours of sex. What was I going to say when he woke up? I couldn't be with him with this kind of drama afoot, but I wasn't sure I could tell him no either.

How could I say no to Brandon Sterling?

I was interrupted from my brooding by a large pair of hands sliding around my waist. I twisted around with a start and found Brandon standing behind me in the shower, completely naked with a hungry, searching look in his eyes. He took up most of the room in the small space, and pushed me back against the wall, so that the water streaming from the rain-nozzle poured over his face, coating his long lashes and face with water, of which he didn't even seem to be aware.

“Hey,” I said softly over the hum of the water.

I had been so lost in thought, I hadn't even heard the bathroom door open and close, hadn't registered the slide of the shower curtain when he'd stepped in. But now he had my attention—one hundred percent.

He didn't respond, just let his gaze rove over my body, followed by his hands. His finger trailed up from my hips and up the sides of my ribs, cupping my breast briefly while he drifted his thumbs over my nipples.

“So beautiful,” he murmured, entranced by his small movements. My breath caught in my throat as he bent down reverentially to kiss one pebbled nipple, then the other, which he sucked briefly in between his teeth before releasing it with a small pop. His lips slid up my chest, tracing my collarbone and up my neck, where his tongue twirled around my pulse with maddening circles.

“Brandon...” I groaned, slipping against him as my legs started to lose their ability to bear my weight. His hands immediately fell from my breast down to cup my ass firmly, holding me up as he pulled me against his erection.

“I got you, baby,” he rumbled before taking my mouth in a gentle, thorough kiss that seared more than the hot water spraying both of us from above. His hands continued to knead my backside tenderly, and a few fingers slipped lower to massage my damp entrance, which was already opening for him of its own accord. All of my previous reservations melted completely away under his touch; the only thing I could think of was how badly I wanted him inside me again.

“Do you feel it, baby?” he asked against my neck. “Do you feel how perfectly we fit? Your body was made for me, Skylar, just like mine was made for yours.”

He pressed the entire length of his trim torso up against mine as if to illustrate the point, eliciting a further groan from the back of my throat as I pawed desperately at his shoulders for him to come even closer.

“Please,” I panted into his slick skin. It was the only thing I could say.

He purred against me and tilted his hips so the tip of his erection teased at the sensitive, open juncture between my legs.

“You want this, Skylar?” he asked as he rolled his hips in, pressing just slightly inside before pulling back out. “You want me inside you?” His tongue slipped into my mouth with a searing kiss before as he pressed inside me just a little bit more. And pulled back out.

“Ummm,” I moaned, biting into the hard lines of his shoulder. My eyes squeezed close, and I squeezed his trim, muscular waist with my legs. I wanted him so bad I could hardly find a way to breathe properly.

“Say it,” he ordered, pressing his erection just an excruciatingly bit further before taking it out yet again. “Tell me.”

“I want it,” I moaned into his skin, tilting my hips toward him in a failed attempt to pull him inside me. His cock slipped tantalizingly between the slippery space between my legs, but still didn’t completely thrust inside me. “Please, Brandon, please!” I begged.

“Okay,” he assented.

But instead of pounding into me with the ferocity I craved, he gripped my ass tighter and entered me at an excruciatingly slow pace forcing me to feel every bit of his length as he slid into my darkest place, inch by terrible, wonderful inch. Still holding me firmly against the shower wall, his flexed biceps the only sign of effort, he arched away from me slightly to watch as he moved his cock in and out at the same agonizingly slow cadence.

“Look at me, Skylar,” he commanded, and my eyes, which were squeezed shut, opened to find his baby blues blazing with love and passion.

“Touch yourself, baby,” he commanded softly. “I want to feel you come around me.”

Without breaking our eye contact, I obediently slipped two fingers between us to massage my clitoris, which was already swollen and throbbing from want. The combination of his slow, forceful movements with the flutter of my fingers was instantaneous.

“Aaah!” I cried out, unable to keep my eyes open any more. “I’m...God, I’m close, Brandon!”

“Not yet, baby,” he cooed in my ear. “Hold it, just a little bit more.” He started to pick up the pace, and I could tell by the slight shaking of his body he was having just as hard of a time holding back. “Just. A little. Bit. More.”

I moaned even louder, pushing off the wall behind me meet his unforgiving movements. Unable to control myself any longer, I tightened suddenly around his cock, which ultimately was both our undoing as he lost his control and started to pump faster and more erratically.

“Oh fuck, Skylar!” he groaned, an animal in the throes of pain and pleasure, slamming back into me against the wall my head landed with a satisfying clunk. I couldn’t have cared less.

We fell apart simultaneously, biting hard into each other’s shoulders as both our orgasms swept through us, quaking through muscle and bone. Brandon’s powerful legs finally buckled, and as we came down from our mutual high, he slid down to his knees in the shower, keeping me securely wrapping around his waist while the water continued to pour over us.

“Please,” he croaked through long, drawn breaths. He leaned down and kissed me, so tenderly it almost hurt. It seemed I wasn’t the only one still reeling from our conversation. “All I am now...it’s yours, I promise. So please, Skylar, let me...let me try. Just let me love you the way you deserve.”

We sat there for a few more moments, letting the hum of the shower fill the silence as we breathed into each other’s

space. I gripped him tightly and threaded my fingers through the wet curls gathering at the nape of his neck. Even under running water, he smelled so good. How could someone who felt so good be wrong for me?

“Please,” he whispered again huskily. His arms were still wrapped around my waist, holding me in a vice-like grip. He was scared, I realized, to let me go.

There was nothing else I could say. In my heart I knew I was never going to leave him anyway. I whispered back:

“Okay.”

~

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Chapter 40

I awoke the next morning feeling sore, disoriented, and slightly hungover. True to her word, Jane made herself scarce enough that I didn't know if she had actually come home last night. Her absence had allowed Brandon and me to share a bottle of cheap wine and greasy Chinese food in between two more bouts of noisy, soul-searing sex. He didn't try to convince me to go back to Beacon Street although I imagined he missed his bed. His feet protruded at least six inches off my college-issued double mattress like he was some kind of giant.

But whether it was because Miranda was still there or he knew it would just make me uncomfortable, the question of leaving never once came up. There was no checking of his cell phone messages, no borrowing my computer to look at his email—for the first time since we'd become involved, Brandon's undivided attention was focused squarely on me.

I had a fairly consistent internal alarm that woke me up most mornings. Sometime just past six, I slipped my robe back on and left Brandon snoring in my bed, a pillow clutched endearingly over his stomach like an oversized teddy bear.

But I had to get up. Unlike most weekends, when some herbal tea and a glance at a textbook would often help me back to sleep if I wanted, this morning my stomach was in complete knots as the events of the past twenty-four hours came crashing back all over again. I brewed a quick cup of Irish Breakfast tea and sat quietly on the couch. Jane had told me to think about it, so I had. And although things looked different in the morning, I wasn't sure I liked their hue.

I huffed. I wanted things to be resolved quickly, but that definitely wasn't in the cards. My gaze dropped to the coffee table, where the crumpled copies of Brandon's divorce records still lay face up. I set my mug on the table and reached for the wrinkled pages.

They were standard court documents, one packet laying out the terms of the separation and the official filing for divorce. Miranda had been given an extremely generous monthly maintenance, along with the residency of their New York apartment as well as a house in Cape Cod. The other stapled packet was a copy of the most recent terms of their divorce agreement, which, I noted, Brandon had signed, but Miranda had not. I wasn't sure why he had brought them—perhaps to prove to me how close he really was to being finished with the whole tawdry business.

I hesitated. Brandon's entire life was contained in these pages. Was this really something I should be looking at?

It didn't take long for my curiosity to get the best of me, and I continued to page through the lengthy document that only Brandon had signed. It was also a fairly standard agreement, its length only accounted for by the sheer volume of assets the two of them shared. It was also incredibly generous, granting Miranda more than seventy percent of their liquid assets and property, as well as almost all of their personal stock portfolio invested in non-Sterling companies and all of their properties, including the house on Beacon Street. The reason was soon clear: Brandon was giving her everything else in exchange for sole ownership of everything related to Sterling Ventures and the law firm. He meant what

he said: he didn't want her anywhere near his company or its boardroom.

Why didn't she want to take the deal? She'd end up personally richer than her husband, although they'd both still be billionaires by a long shot. Was it just to mess with him? Or was she still trying to stay connected to him to put off the inevitable?

As I flipped through the rest of the agreement, I continued to ruminate on that unpleasant—yet unfortunately understandable—possibility until I saw a name that made my entire brain shutter completely. The end of the agreement included a set amount of their assets to be paid into five different trusts, separate from the money that would be split between them. The first two trustees' names were familiar enough—Douglas Murphy and Michael Larsen were clearly the formal names of the men who had gone to prison in Brandon's stead, causing a permanent stain on their records that would follow them and their job prospects for the rest of their lives. Paul Sterling was obviously family, maybe his father. Emily Petersen was also clearly of some relation through his foster family. It was the fifth name on the list that stopped me.

Victor Salvaturi Messina.

Victor Messina was a relatively common name among second and third generation Italians. I had actually met two different ones personally: one in New York, one in Boston. And I seriously doubted that Brandon care enough about the pizza delivery kid from the North End to give him several million dollars.

No, I knew exactly who Victor Salvaturi Messina was. Brandon Sterling was make payments into a trust for New York gangster who had nearly cost my father his life. He was doing exactly what he had told me not to, and getting wrapped up again in crime.

He'd said that part of his life was over. He'd said he understood why I didn't want him coming near those men. I thought he understood how desperate I was to get me and mine away from this man, from this kind of life! The last thing I wanted to do was give the keys to a piggy bank to a man who would never be able to get enough. Who would never, ever leave us alone.

A jingle of keys at the door shook me out of my stupor, causing me to drop the papers back on the table like they burned my fingers. Jane entered the apartment, slow and sluggish in an outfit clearly designed to be worn at night in much warmer temperatures.

"Oh, hey!" she greeted me with a start when she saw me sitting on the couch. Jane frowned at my expression as she took off her coat and quickly hung it on the rack next to the door. "Everything okay?"

With a shaky hand, I pointed a finger at the papers on the table.

"Ah," Jane said knowingly, following my direction. "You looked. Yeah, it's a shitload of assets, isn't it? You know these kinds of people are loaded, but it doesn't really hit you what that means until you find out they could buy Nicaragua if they wanted to, does it? Well, the good news is that if you ever do

marry the guy, you'll be able to negotiate one hell of a prenup."

"It's not that," I replied. I grasped at the papers and held out the one with the trust agreements on it. I pointed to the name that had me quaking with bad memories.

"Vicomte Slughead Meshuggena?" Jane joked as she leaned over the couch, squinting her eyes before she stood up. "Goddammit, I should have brought my glasses with me. The guy wasn't even worth taking them off anyway. What does it say?"

"Victor Salvaturi Messina," I said slowly as I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "He's a small time mobster. He's bad news."

I took the papers back and set them down on the coffee table as if they contained some terribly contagious disease.

Jane shed her shoes and walked around to sit next to me on the couch. "Is he..."

I nodded. "Yes. He's the same guy who beat the shit out of my dad. And for some reason, Brandon is giving him money. A lot of it."

Jane nodded slowly. She didn't know that much about my family's entire history with the Brooklyn crime families, but she knew about the most recent events, enough to comprehend the consequences of this particular revelation. She reached over cautiously and set a hand on my shoulder while I stared at the crumpled sheets of paper.

"What do you want to do, Sky?" she asked quietly, checking over her shoulder toward the bedrooms, where

Brandon's light snoring filtered out every few seconds.

"I thought..." I whispered vacantly, "...that I could do it. That I could forgive him and we could move on. But this... he's getting involved with this scene, going over my head, inviting this fucking scum into my family's life permanently. How am I supposed to get my dad clean if he has this menace forever in his life? Is this supposed to pay him off? Does he really think a guy like this won't come knocking around for more if he knows it's there?"

My voice had become shrill to the point of being almost soundless. I took deep breaths as my chest constricted. I pushed my hands over my face as if to cleanse myself of the situation. It helped, if not entirely. When I pulled them back through my hair, sudden clarity came over me. It didn't matter what Brandon's intentions were or whether or not we were desperately in love. It didn't matter that I had never felt like this for anyone and suspected I never would again. I absolutely could not allow my family to come anywhere close to this kind of mess again. And I could not be with someone who wasn't honest with me.

"Do you want me to ask him to leave?" Jane asked. "Say the word, Sky, and I'll march back there and kick his naked ass to the curb for you. You know I will."

I looked up. I loved him too. I knew that. But I didn't want to end up like these women I met at the clinic, who threw their lives away for a man because of some bullshit notion of love, and I certainly couldn't be indebted millions of dollars on account of Victor fucking Messina. I was better than that.

I turned to Jane, full of decision.

“No,” I said quietly, yet definitively. A deep mixture of resolve and regret throbbed within my heart. This was going to be hard, but I knew I had to do it.

“Jane,” I said. She looked at me with sympathy, as if she already knew what I would ask. “Can you help me out with something?”

“Need me to call the security guard?”

I shook my head. “No, no. Just...can I borrow some clothes? I’m going to leave him a note saying I’ve gone to the library or something and will be tied up with research all day. He’ll go, I’m sure of it. Just...tell him that’s where I went, okay? And that I didn’t want to wake him up.”

She looked uneasy. “Skylar...”

“Please, Jane. If I see him right now...I don’t think I’ll be able to do this.”

All of a sudden, I couldn’t move fast enough. I stood up and darted quickly and quietly about the apartment, gathering my books and papers I needed and jamming them into my messenger bag. I grabbed my cell phone, keys, and wallet from my purse and slipped them inside too, flipping efficiently through the bag to make sure everything else was in order. When I looked up, Jane was still sitting on the couch, watching me with obvious sadness.

“Jane,” I said, my tone bordering on a bark, the way it did when I was both frustrated and determined. I wanted to get past this, and Brandon could wake up at any minute. “Clothes. I can’t leave the apartment dressed in nothing but a bathrobe.”

She blinked and stood up. “Right. I’ll go find you something to wear.”

She reemerged from her room a few minutes later carrying a pair of stretchy leggings and a black concert sweatshirt for her favorite death metal band. I looked down at the logo, which was a blend of Cthulhu and a zombie, and back up with a raised eyebrow, which only made Jane laugh.

“Hey, you like black, right?” she joked. “Give me a break, it’s laundry day.” She didn’t need to add that finding clothes from her closet that would fit me wasn’t exactly easy, given that she was roughly five inches taller than me and two sizes smaller around the waist.

I gave her a quick hug. “Thanks, Janey. It’s perfect.”

I slipped into the bathroom to change, brush my teeth, and tie my hair up before reemerging in the all-black ensemble, over which I pulled my knee-high, black rain boots that I kept in the coat closet by the door and my favorite gray knit hat. I didn’t feel like putting in contacts—I had a feeling within a few hours I’d likely be bawling my eyes out—so I shoved my glasses on before tugging on gloves, a scarf, and then buttoning my black trench coat over everything else.

“You look like a bad ass,” Jane said with a sad smile. “He’s going to freak when he wakes up, you know. You sure you can’t just stay and kick him out yourself? Don’t you even want to ask him what this is all about?”

I shook my head. My mind was made up. It didn’t really matter what he would say about the whole affair—this was way beyond the scope of what I could handle. Our age and income disparities? I was just coming around on that. His

obvious abandonment and childhood insecurities? Perhaps. Even his divorce I probably could have managed eventually. But the Mafia on top of all of it. As much as I felt his presence pulling me back to the bedroom, I had to—*had* to—think with my head on this one.

“I’m going to go to New York for the rest of the weekend since Monday’s a holiday,” I said, adjusting the strap across my chest and brushing down my coat. “Just tell him I forgot about a project and I went to the library for the day. Tell him... tell him I’ll call him later. And that I love him.”

My voice cracked on the last word. It was the only thing I’d said that wasn’t a lie, and Jane knew it. She reached out and lightly squeezed my hand.

“Sure, Sky, whatever you say,” she said softly. “But if he throws a fit...”

“He won’t,” I replied, wishing I were as sure as I sounded. “I think he only does that around me. Will you let me know when he’s gone?”

Jane nodded. “No problem.”

I fought not to glance down the hallway as I opened the front door as quietly as I could.

“All right,” I said, suddenly lowering my voice to a whisper. “Later.”

“Be safe,” Jane said, and shut the door carefully behind me.

I stood for as long as it took to take five deep breaths, sucking in the air slowing and exhaling it just as slowly. It was physically painful to be standing here, doing what I was about

to do. But there was no alternative. As I let out the last breath, I straightened up, turned down the long, deserted corridor, and used every ounce of willpower I had to walk away from the man I loved.

~

Three hours later, I was about halfway down to New York on the train, having opted for a more expensive mode of travel in the event he pulled another stunt and showed up waiting for me again in Chinatown. I was curled up in a seat by the window, watching the cloudy New England seashore pass me by as I enjoyed the relative solitude of the early Saturday express. My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out to find a text from Jane.

Jane: Finally woke up. Told him you were at the library without cell service but I don't think he believed me.

I paused, my thumb lingering over the qwerty as I considered what he might have been thinking.

Me: Why not?

Jane's response was almost instantaneous.

Jane: He saw the divorce papers scattered around. Pretty sure he thinks u were mad abt something.

I paused, unsure of what to write back. My phone buzzed again before I could reply.

Me: He's not stupid.

It was too easy to imagine his face, coming out of the bedroom looking for me eagerly after what must have seemed like a night of hard won reconciliation, and finding nothing but

my uncharacteristically sober roommate and the divorce agreement scattered around the coffee table. Of course he knew what had happened. Deep down, I knew he would—it's why I had skipped town like a coward rather than face it. He would have seen everything on my glass face the minute he woke up.

I blinked away a tear as I thought about what we had shared in the shower, he begging for me to love him. And God, I did.

My phone vibrated in my hand with another text from Jane.

Jane: He's standing outside the building. I think he's waiting for u to come back. Do u want me to talk to him? He's freezing down there. It's actually hailing outside.

Waiting, always waiting. If I hadn't known how much Brandon loved me, I would know it now—he was always so scared to miss me, that he would literally wait through a hailstorm in order to catch me at the right time. I closed my eyes and saw him at the Chinatown bus stop, outside the theater, striding into the club in New York, and leaning against my building only last night. His eyes were always slightly nervous, but eager all same. He really would never stop chasing me, like he said. Only this time, I wasn't going to let myself be chased.

I tapped a quick message back to Jane:

Me: U can tell him I'm not coming back.

I pressed the off button on my phone to ward off the barrage of phone calls and texts that were sure to come and

slid it into the bottom of my bag. Then I tucked my legs back under me and pressed my face up against the cold glass of the train window. I imagined Brandon's face as Jane told him the truth of what had happened. And silently, I began to cry as I finally felt the pain of what I was giving up.

~

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Chapter 41

The sound of my grandmother's sharp, gravelly voice woke me from a night of thrashing around my bed, twisted up in dreams of mournful blue eyes and rainstorms. I exhaled a deep breath through the mass of tangled red hair that fluttered over my face. God, if I hadn't known I was in Brooklyn before, few words out of Bubbe took me straight back to Flatbush. Maybe if I wished hard enough, she could take me back months, before this mess began.

“*Bubbela!* Get your *tuchus* down here for breakfast!”

I squinted my eyelids open into the stale light that peeked around the blinds of my small attic window. Maybe not.

“Go away, Bubbe!” I croaked at the door as I sat up. The mattress creaked loudly under me, as if it had had as hard a time with sleep as I had. I had a full day of studying ahead of me, considering I still had to catch up on the work I'd missed last week. With everything that had been going on in my personal life, my focus was starting to slip, something I just couldn't afford so close to the end. I was going to require more sleep to keep the thoughts of Brandon Sterling at bay.

Unfortunately, the small light on my phone that signaled messages was right next to my face. I had managed, with helpful distractions in the forms of liquor, music, and my dad, to ignore all notifications after I'd finally turned the phone back on. Sometime late last night, I had fallen into the refuge of my mattress without a single, exhausted thought towards the insistent green light.

Now, however, was a different story. With a sinking feeling in my stomach, I grabbed my phone and activated the screen, which revealed five new voicemails, twenty-eight new text messages, and a whopping forty-three missed calls. All were from a certain frantic CEO.

I deleted all of the voicemails, knowing that if I heard the sound of his deep voice, my resolve would melt faster than ice cream in August. I swiped over to the messages, which began innocently enough.

Brandon: Missed u when u left.

Then with more mischief:

Brandon: Was hoping to take u out for breakfast. I'd just eat u.

When it was clear I wasn't replying, they became more inquisitive and frustrated:

Brandon: When do u think u'll be finished at the library?

Brandon: It would b nice if u could actually check ur messages.

After he had clearly been told that my trip to the library was a farce, they started to turn understandably confused and frantic.

Brandon: what did i do?

Brandon: im freaking out here. pls call asap.

Brandon: What the hell skylar? WHERE R U???

I scrolled down through the questions, the hurt, the obvious frustration, the confusion. Jane clearly hadn't told him a thing about where I'd gone, but Brandon was too smart not

to figure at least something out. It was clear from the messages that he'd deduced I was angry about something and determined to leave. Through various phases of anger, denial, and even begging, I scrolled to the last one, which seemed to stop my heart for a few moments.

Brandon: I meant it, red. Never.

He and I both know what he meant. He'd never stop chasing me. I'd done the right thing in deleting the voicemails—if I had to hear him say it aloud, I wouldn't be able to ignore the part of me that didn't want him to stop. No, this was for the best. If Brandon had come looking for me, he hadn't thought to come to New York. Yet.

I deleted all of the messages, set the phone back on the nightstand, and pulled the covers over my aching head. I couldn't open the lines for communication. Not until I was strong enough to say no to him no matter what.

“Skylar Ellen Crosby!”

I groaned again at the sound of clipped heels marching up the rickety wooden stairs to my room. The door burst open with a loud thwack against the wall. Before I knew it, the blankets were yanked off my head by pair of small, strong hands that belonged to an equally small, strong body.

“Hey!” I yelped, yanking the blanket back up to ward against the chill in the room, but sitting up all the same to face my grandmother. “I was sleeping!”

Bubbe reached up to pat her immaculately set gray bob, which was loaded with so much hairspray it hardly moved under her fingers. It was Sunday, which meant that she had her

weekly mah-jongg game at the community center, but not until three. She was dressed in her favorite outfit, dark brown, poly-blend slacks and a matching sweater set, over which she had her familiar kitchen apron, which, if the pattern of orange and brown flowers was any indicator, was purchased around the same time my dad was born. I couldn't help but smile a little at the sight of her. Bubbe wasn't the most stylish lady on the block, but she was, as my Dad would say, definitely an old school dame. She also looked like a garden gnome.

"Skylar," she said again, pointing a manicured finger at me. "First you come traipsing down to the club last night and drink too much whiskey with your father. That's right, he told me. My Danny doesn't keep anything from his ma, and you know that."

I sighed, rubbing my temples. God, my dad was such a mama's boy. After escaping my apartment yesterday morning, I had chosen to hole up at the NYU library rather than Brooklyn to be interrogated by Bubbe. I had begged another family emergency with my instructors and gotten a round of apologetic support from them.

Dad had given me the perfect outlet when I appeared at Nick's without warning. He didn't seem surprised to see me, just nodded silently when I took a seat at his small table near the band and raised his casted hand to Nick to get me a drink. He wouldn't play for the foreseeable future, but he was as dedicated to his band as ever. We watched them play for several hours, two wounded Crosbys with our whiskey. The combination of liquor and jazz managed to keep my thoughts at bay; the sight of my dad cradling his maimed paw while he

watched his best friends make music without him was enough to maintain my resolve about my decision.

I sat up regretfully and faced my grandmother, whose imperious brown gaze more than made up for her diminutive size.

“It’s eleven o’clock,” she said as she tapped on the face of her polished, gold-chain watch. “Your father’s been up since nine, and he was out just as late. Now, it’s time to get up and have breakfast like a civilized family before you go back to school. I don’t know what you’re doing here on a Monday, Skylar, but I know you need to get your keister back to Boston tonight.”

Bubbe cocked her head, waiting for my smart-ass response, but when our eyes met, the forceful expression slipped from her features. She immediately crossed the room and pulled me to her small body.

I didn’t cry—Crosby women rarely cried, and only when no one was there to see them. But I laid my head on her tiny shoulder and let her rock me like a child as I took comfort in her familiar scent of wool, flour, and Chanel No. 5.

“That rich *goy* who stayed at the Waldorf?” she asked, brushing my hair lightly down my back, occasionally picking out tangles from the bedraggled waves.

Wordlessly, I nodded against her shoulder. She patted my head once more and pushed me back upright so she could look me over properly. It didn’t matter that I was twenty-six; I would always be her little girl.

“Tell me everything,” she ordered, and folded her hands neatly in her lap while she waited for me to speak.

So I did. I started at the beginning, with the chance meeting in the middle of a snowstorm. I left out the steamy parts that no one in their right mind would tell their grandmother, but I knew that Bubbe was under no illusion regarding what I did with men. She made no bones about her desire to see me happily married, but generally maintained a somewhat humorous, don’t ask, don’t tell attitude regarding my premarital exploits.

As I recounted the story of the past few months, she listened with her characteristic poker face, her only emotional betrayed by an arched eyebrow when I recounted my rebuff of the trip to Paris, and low sigh as I filled her in on Brandon’s current predicament and what he had done for our family. When I told her about the name I had discovered in Brandon’s divorce documents—the name that had caused me to leave him sleeping in my room while I made out like a bandit—she straightened slightly, but remained silent as I finished my story. My hands clasped over my knees, I waited for her verdict.

“Well,” she said after an uncharacteristic moment of quiet contemplation. “That’s the quite the *macher* you found for yourself, isn’t he?”

It was unclear what exactly she meant. *Macher* was Yiddish word that roughly meant someone with a lot of ambition, but it could also be used as an insult, like “fat cat.” I sighed, my head bowed over the sheets tented across my knees

as I readied myself for the inevitable onslaught against idiot *goyim* and why I should be dating a nice Jewish boy instead.

“A mess, but a *mensch*,” she murmured to herself. A man of worth, a man to be respected.

I looked up in surprise to find her staring at me, one eyebrow pointed expectantly. She reached a small hand out to tap me on the knee.

“So what are you doing here, Skylar?” she asked sharply. “Despite his troubles, you’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

I breathed out a long sigh between my pursed lips and dropped my head back to my knees.

“I can’t, Bubbe,” I muttered into the bedding.

“What? I can’t hear you when you’re talking into your knees, *bubbela*,” she snapped.

“I can’t!” I protested as I yanked my head back up and thrust my hands into my hair. “You heard the story, Bubbe. You want me with a man like that? A man who is already someone else’s husband, who’s in some kind of nasty business with a guy like Victor Messina?”

Irritably, I pushed the covers aside and stood up, stalking across my small bedroom to yank a pair of old jeans out of the beat-up dresser drawer. With a loud huff, I stuffed my legs into them, ignoring Bubbe’s obvious disapproval with the worn holes in the knees.

“I don’t know why you insist on walking around like such a *schlumper*, Skylar,” she remarked, crossing one leg delicately over the other. She sat at the edge of my bed as if it

were her throne. “I know you have nice clothes—I’ve seen the pictures on the Facebook.”

I rolled my eyes, tugging on an equally raggedy sweatshirt—my favorite old gray and purple NYU hoodie I had bought on my first day on campus. “Can’t I be comfortable in my own home?” I muttered. Bubbe loved to argue, and I was used to being picked on. Sometimes I thought growing up with her predestined my career as a lawyer.

I finished buttoning up my jeans and turned around to find Bubbe standing up. She brushed the nonexistent wrinkles out of her slacks and then propped her hands on her hips as she looked me over with obvious irritation.

“Please don’t start, Bubbe,” I said, but she held up a finger again to stop me so she could say her peace.

“The saying goes, behind every strong man is a strong woman.” She paused meaningfully, tapping her fingernail thoughtfully on worn walnut trim of my nightstand. “It sounds to me like this Brandon is strong enough for my granddaughter, but he needs someone to be strong for him too.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but she shook her finger back at me again.

“Ah, ah, ah, *no*. Let me finish. You told me this story, and I hear about a man who needs his woman—that’s you, Skylar, not this Miranda woman who clearly never loved him. I also hear about a man who has been working to do his best by you and yours. He is protecting this family, and he wants to give you the world. Maybe this business with Victor Messina is a bad idea, or maybe there’s more to it than you think. If it’s

bad, it seems to me he would need you to guide him away from it, not run away when he needs you too. And for what? Because you're scared of his money? Because you're scared of his love for you? Maybe, *bubbela*, it's because you're scared of yourself and how you really feel for him."

She paused again, presumably to let me ruminate on her question for a few moments. I knew better than to argue back. I'd just get another finger-wagging. So I stood there, didn't even dare to move. I watched the dust flecks scatter in the streams of light that landed on the worn wood floor; I listened to the sound of her fingernail tapping on the nightstand.

When she had apparently waited long enough, Bubbe spoke again.

"There is another person in this family who runs when things get hard, Skylar," she said. "A person who runs from the person who loves her and who she loves too. And I think you know who it is."

My head snapped up. "That's not fair! I am *nothing* like my mother, Bubbe."

Bubbe shrugged and walked to the door, where she braced a hand on the frame as she stopped. "You are just as much like your mother as you are your father, *bubbela*, and that's the truth. They each gave you half of your beautiful self, half your flaws, and half your strengths. There's good and bad to them both—and God knows I love my son. But it's up to you which one of those halves you want to be like, or whether you want to be like either of them at all. But you have to see what you're doing before you can change it." She flicked her head toward stairs. "Now come downstairs before breakfast gets cold. I

didn't slave away in the kitchen for half the morning so you could turn your nose up at my blintz."

And with that final comment, she disappeared from the room, letting me search for a pair of socks while thinking more about what kind of man Brandon Sterling might actually be, and what kind of woman I was turning out to be too.

~

The small kitchen table was laid with the familiar green glass plates and matching juice glasses I had grown up with, along with a large baking dish filled with Bubbe's blintzes. A pitcher of orange juice stood in the middle of the table along with a pot of fresh coffee. Dad sat in one of the old farmhouse-style chairs, his feet propped up on another while he read the *Post* and sipped from his chipped coffee mug.

"Hey there, Pips," he said with a smile as he pulled his feet off the chair so I could sit down. A week's recuperation had done him good. Most of the bruises had faded from his face, and he no longer had to wear the nose brace. Although there was still a scab from the gash on his forehead, he looked almost like himself again. He folded up the paper next to his plate. "How're you feeling this morning?"

"Morning, Dad," I said with a quick kiss on his cheek, which was scratchy with new stubble. He was still in the same red and gray flannel bathrobe he had worn for so long that Bubbe had to patch the elbows at least three different times. Although I knew that because he was on medical leave, he was likely doing this every morning until noon instead of the Sundays normally allowed by his job, the normalcy of it was still a pleasant site.

Dad grinned, pulled on his mustache with his good hand, and surveyed me briefly before pouring himself another cup of coffee. He was clearly starting to feel better too. The stitches in his hand were due for their first inspection next week, and there were no signs of infection. Bubbe had told me over the phone that he had gone to his first Gamblers' Anonymous meeting as well as an appointment with a therapist. She'd done her duty and driven him there herself.

Bubbe sat down at the table and quickly filled the morning silence with a discussion of temple gossip and the latest news from her gossip circle at temple. Dad and I simply ate our blintz, which was filled with sweet ricotta and blueberries, just the way I always remembered it. Once we were finished, Bubbe cleared the table efficiently and loaded the dishes into the dishwasher while Dad and I continued to sip our coffee and juice, picking occasionally at the leftover blintz in the middle of the table. The room was warm and cozy. We talked about all manner of benign subjects—the latest gossip at the community center, some new ordinance the mayor had just passed. It was all so normal. Like Brandon Sterling and Victor Messina had never intruded on any of our lives.

“All right, I got my hair appointment, and then mah-jongg at three,” Bubbe announced as she wiped down the yellow Formica countertop.

“I don't know why you need to get your hair done, Ma,” Dad said as he wiped a scrap of blintz from his cheek with a paper napkin. “You already look like a princess.”

Bubbe set the sponge in its tray by the sink and grinned at my father. “You,” she said fondly with a pointed finger. “I'll

see you for dinner. Skylar, will you be here?”

I shook my head, still gripping my coffee. “No, I’ve got to catch the four o’clock bus so I don’t get back too late. I can’t miss any more class.”

She nodded with approval and pulled on her coat, which was the same shade of brown as the rest of her outfit. After checking that her sleeves were even, she marched over to where I sat and tipped her head, indicating wordlessly for kiss on the cheek. I obliged.

“Love you, Bubbe,” I murmured.

“You too, sweetheart,” she said. “Danny, dinner’s at six. If you’re going somewhere, be home by then, all right?”

“Have fun, Ma.”

Dad raised his good hand in farewell, and we both watched her march militarily out of the house, leaving the comfortable silence that generally characterized my dad’s and my interactions. He picked up the folded copy of the *Post* and wordlessly handed me the sections he’d already read. I glanced at them: sports and business—but generally I didn’t like the outrageous, tabloid tone of the *Post*, preferring the *Times* instead.

“So, Pips, when are we gonna see that young man of yours again?” Dad asked once Bubbe had pulled out of the driveway. He took a long sip of coffee and peered at me over the rim of his cup.

I sighed. “I don’t think he’ll be around much, Dad. It...it didn’t work out.”

“That’s too bad,” he said mildly, as if he hadn’t told me just a few weeks ago that Brandon was perfect for me. He paused. “He seemed like a decent guy.”

“Yeah, well...” I shrugged, looking toward the window while I worked to swallow back the tears welling up again. I didn’t want to cry, and the fact that it was really over with Brandon was still so raw. “Dad?”

“Yeah, Pippi?”

I smiled at the familiar nickname, more fitting since I had actually put my hair into two braids before coming down. “Dad, have you heard from Victor Messina recently?”

My father’s small frame stiffened slightly, and the paper in his hands crinkled audibly under a strained grasp, but otherwise he didn’t change his expression at the mention of the mobster’s name.

“He came into the club a few times last week, Pips, but he doesn’t talk to me,” he said quietly. His good hand went reflexively to cradle the bad against his chest. “To be honest, kid, I usually just get out of there if I see him coming. Why do you ask?”

I shrugged again. “No reason. I was just wondering.”

I searched his face for something that might reveal an added pressure from Messina, something maybe he wasn’t telling me. Something like Messina knew who his daughter’s boyfriend was and was looking to shake us down for even more money. But there was nothing but a father’s love and concern there.

I exhaled with relief. “How was your GA group?”

Dad leaned back farther in his chair with a rueful chuckle. “You’re a shit liar, kid, just like your old man. The group was all right. I’ll keep going. It’s interesting to meet other people going through the same stuff.”

I nodded. At this point I didn’t care why he was going, so long as he was.

“Good,” I said as I stood up and cleared our empty dishes to the sink. I walked back to where Dad sat and wrapped my arms gently around his shoulders, leaning down to rest my chin on his collar bone. “Love you, Dad.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment, but reached up with his good hand to squeeze my wrist. “Right back at you, kid.” Then he looked up with a warm smile that made the thin skin at the edges of his eyelids crinkle. “I’m going to turn on the Mets game. Do you want to watch?”

I stood up and smiled in return, thankful that I could see no trace of hiding or nerves in his response. “No, Dad, I have to get ready. I’ll probably just pack up and take the train into the city, see if I can catch an earlier bus.”

He stood up with a screech of his chair leg on the worn linoleum.

“No problem, Pips,” he said, squeezing me on the shoulder as he passed.

He shuffled out of the kitchen, and I suddenly felt like I could breathe a little bit easier. Maybe I’d been running away, but coming home had definitely been the right decision. I pulled my phone out of my back pocket and looked down again. Another text message had arrived, also from Brandon.

Brandon: Skylar I deserve an explanation. Please. I'm begging u.

A few seconds later, another message appeared.

Brandon: Don't make me come down there.

I sighed. The jig was up; I knew it wouldn't take him long to determine where I'd gone. It was time to deal with reality.

I started walking up the stairs to my bedroom, pulled up Brandon's number, and pressed dial.

"Hello? Skylar?" His answer was frantic and abrupt, just after the first ring.

"Hey, Brandon," I said softly as I got to the top of the main stairs and started the ascent to the attic.

"Skylar, Jesus Christ, are you okay?"

I breathed out through pursed lips. "Yeah, yeah, I'm sorry I didn't call sooner. I'm fine. I'm in New York."

"Did something happen? Is your dad okay? Your roommate wouldn't tell me a goddamn thing, just that you weren't coming back. Why didn't you just call and tell me yourself?"

"Brandon, I—" I paused on the rickety wood steps, unsure how to proceed. Did he really not have any idea what was going on?

"I want to hear you say it, Red," he spoke softly, even a bit dangerously. "If you're doing what I think you're doing, you should at least have the guts to say it straight out. If not in person, then right now."

I sighed again. Victor Messina, Victor Messina. I chanted the name over and over to myself until a ball of red rage started to burn steadily at my core. I thought of the bruises on my dad's face, the look of his limp, frail body in the hospital bed, the massive question that still lingered of whether or not he would ever make music again. I remembered the shrill hysteria in Bubbe's voice when her only son was in the hospital.

And for some reason, Brandon was giving money to a guy like that. Knowing him, it was likely out of some kind of misplaced gallantry, but I couldn't be involved either way.

"It's over," I bit out. The stairs protested loudly as I jogged the rest of the way to my room. I slammed the door shut behind me, wanting as much privacy for this conversation as the house could provide. I collapsed into the mussed blankets on the bed, inhaling the faint scent of lavender fabric softener. I could do this. I could.

"What? Why?" Brandon's voice was sharp, biting through the scratchy cell phone service.

"I just..." I paused, thinking about how to say this without actually having to say it. I wasn't stupid. If he really was in league with Messina and for some reason it wasn't above board, then chances were, I shouldn't know about it. "I just thought about everything. Meredith. The whole divorce. I saw the papers, and it's too much. I'm twenty-six, Brandon. I can't deal with all of that. I shouldn't have to. It's not worth the trouble."

Even I winced at the last statement. I had to wait several seconds with my face buried in my pillow, listening to his

uneven breathing over the phone. Just when I was about to ask if he was still there, he spoke, the timber of his normal baritone shaky and uneven.

“Is that really how you feel?”

“Yes,” I whispered. “It is.”

“We can’t talk about it? You’re not even going to give me a chance to defend myself or anything?”

“No,” I said more strongly than I felt. “It’s done. It’s over, Brandon. Please don’t chase me anymore. You deserve to move on with your life...just not with me.”

My heart ached at the thought of him doing just that. I wiped a stray tear that rolled down my face, shaking my head hard to will away the tears. Why was this so hard?

Several more seconds passed. I flipped over to my back and stared up at my ceiling, counting the open rafters. My cell phone was warm against my cheek, but that wasn’t reason I was starting to sweat.

“Brandon?” I asked after counting at least fifteen more rafters than actually existed up there. “Are you there?”

A few more beats of silence passed. Then: “Yeah.”

“It’s over,” I repeated, hoping he would get the message and leave me to try to repair the giant rent in my heart. He paused again before speaking, and I continued to wipe away the tears that kept streaming, unbidden, down my face. I choked a big sob down and started to count down from ten.

When I reached one, it occurred to me he might not actually be there anymore. He was finally gone. The thought

utterly and completely broke my heart.

“Brandon?” I asked, my voice small in the dark of the unlit room.

“We’ll see,” he said, and hung up.

~

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Chapter 42

There's nothing like a breakup to jumpstart personal ambition. Some people tend to wallow when they have a broken heart; they turn into Bella Swan and basically self-implode for several months until they forget the color of the guy's eyes or the exact tone of the girl's voice. They meet someone else who helps them forget a little more, and eventually they can return to the land of the living.

Others, like me, drowned themselves in work instead. In fact, the degree to which my heart was actually broken tended to directly correlate to the amount of effort I invested into making the other aspects of my life thrive. Considering I'd never had a broken heart like this before, it stood to bear that I would finish the semester third in my graduating class. I had also been putting in extra time at FLS, so when Kieran asked me to wait a few minutes on my last day, I figured it would be good news, and maybe even to offer a personal reference—no small deal when the reference was coming from one of the top family law advocates in the Northeast.

“So, I wanted to talk to you about where you're planning to work after graduation,” Kieran said in her characteristically blunt manner. I had come to understand her abrasive manner was really just a way of cutting through the bullshit, and I appreciated it instead of being intimidated by it.

“Have you decided where you'll be?” she asked.

I sat back in my chair after straightening the files that would be attended to by the summer interns, due to start on

Monday.

“Well, I’ve been offered a position with the Brooklyn D.A.’s office,” I said. “They are giving me until Monday to decide.”

Kieran nodded with an uncharacteristic smile. “Good, good. Well, you’ll have one more offer to consider along with that. I’ve been authorized to offer you a position at my firm as well. Junior associate, full benefits, starting at eighty-five, with full pay while you study for the bar.”

I gaped. Kiefer Knightly was the other full service firm in Boston, and devoted fifteen percent of its practice to pro-bono cases—much more than the typical five percent offered by most firms. It recruited heavily from the Ivy League and usually made offers to its second year interns. The fact that Kieran had gone out of her way to procure me a position meant a lot. I’d be able to do the kind of advocacy work I liked while making about twice the salary the D.A. could offer. On top of that, I’d be able to work with someone I truly considered a mentor.

But. There was Dad, who was slowly recovering, but obviously looking forward to having me close again. There was Bubbe, who clearly needed help keeping my dad in line. And there were, of course, other reasons to get out of Boston. Tall reasons. Blue-eyed reasons. Reasons that still crept into my thoughts after almost two months and woke me up in the middle of the night with dreams I could swear were real.

“Can I think about it?” I asked.

Kieran raised a thin eyebrow in mild surprise. “Really? I assumed you’d jump at the opportunity. There’s no firm like

us, you know.”

I nodded in agreement. “I know. It’s just...well, I was planning on moving back to New York. My family is there, and I think they miss me.”

It was a feeble excuse, but I couldn’t tell her the real reason I was thinking of leaving Boston. Kieran was the last woman who would run away from any man, I was sure of it. But since she was friends with Brandon, I had no idea what she thought of our situation, if she knew anything at all, and I couldn’t risk her thinking I was anything but unprofessional.

She nodded sympathetically. “I hear you. But Skylar? Promise me you’ll think about it, all right? I’ll give you a tour of the firm. New York’s only a few hours away. You’ll still be able to visit your family.”

Hesitantly, I agreed I would consider the option. After all, Boston was a big city. A few more months, and maybe one of these days I’d finally forget Brandon Sterling. But in the meantime, I bent my head down to finish organizing the last few files, ignoring the fact that despite the last two months, I could still picture a pair of sky-blue eyes with perfect clarity and the deep tenor of his voice echoed through my dreams almost every night.

~

I was the second to last student in my Family Law seminar to finish the final exam. With one click, I uploaded my exam and closed my laptop with a both elation and a twinge of sorrow; this was my last exam, the last day I’d ever spend as a law student. Graduation was on Monday, and between now

and then I had to choose a future law firm, pack up my apartment, and find a new place to live.

I never expected to leave Harvard feeling more overwhelmed than I did when I started, but here I was.

“You going to meet us at Cleo’s?” Eric knocked me out of my worries with a grin as he followed me out of the classroom. “A bunch of us are going to celebrate the end of classes.”

I smiled at him. I had intended to work my troubles out at the pool, but maybe a drink was just what I needed.

Because Eric had taken one of the lucrative positions at Sterling Grove, he talked nonstop about his plans there as we made our way across campus to the bar.

“So, have you decided yet?” Eric asked as we joined the sizable group of students from our class who had colonized a back corner of the bar. We waved to a few of our classmates, but took seats at a big booth that was mostly full of coats and book bags.

I shook my head while I dropped my bag in the corner of the booth and removed my jacket. “No. I still have no fucking clue what I’m going to do.”

“Is it just your family that’s pulling you back to New York?” Eric poured us both a pint of cheap beer from the pitcher in the middle of the table, and I accepted mine gratefully.

“No,” I said again after taking a very long gulp. “There are other factors too.”

Eric raised his eyebrow with a knowing look, and I glared in response. “It’s not what you think.”

He chuckled. “Whatever you say, Crosby. But I know you, and you’re not exactly Lady Justice. I know you like working with women and everything, but those guys are intense. It won’t be anything like FLS. You’d be happier at Kiefer Knightly, where you can be choosier and make better money too.”

I sighed. He wasn’t totally wrong, but I wasn’t about to admit that. After all, someone else was Kiefer Knightly’s biggest client—someone I was trying—and failing—to put out of my mind.

“Hey kids.”

I turned to my right to find Jane waving at me as she joined our small group. She took a cozy seat next to one of the kids from my Family Law seminar, and he wrapped his arm around her shoulder in a way that indicated they were a lot more than just casual classmates. As I watched them, I envied her. Jane never made any commitments in Boston, especially since she was planning to move back to Chicago the whole time. She had fun, and as much of it as she wanted, no apologies to anyone. Ever.

I sighed and took another long sip of my whiskey. Regardless of where I chose to work this fall, I had to be out of student housing in five days, and I’d be staying in Flatbush for exactly as long as it took me to figure out what I was going to do and where I was going to live while I studied for the bar in one of the two states. Maybe taking a page out of Jane’s

playbook wouldn't be such a bad idea. A few short term flings might be the perfect antidote for Brandon Sterling.

As if my thoughts telegraphed his name directly to Jane's brain, she looked up her from her man of the hour and pulled a small box and an envelope from her purse.

"Here," she said with a knowing look, handing the package across the table to me. "It was on our mat this morning."

I took the envelope and box with a sigh and set them down on the table in front of me, where I examined them as I polished off the last of my drink. The envelopes had been coming every day since Brandon had finally realized I wasn't going to take any of his calls. Surprisingly, he hadn't shown up anywhere he knew I would be, and after a few weeks, I had stopped expecting to find him leaning against entrance to the law school, FLS, or my apartment building.

But every day for nearly the last six weeks, a letter enclosed in a simple white envelope had been delivered to the doormat outside of my apartment. The only address was my name, written in bold, direct print across the front. And inside each and every one was a letter, hand written on legal paper, in which Brandon poured out his heart in the way of stories about himself.

The first one had made his case plainly:

Skylar,

I thought about sending flowers. I thought about sending gifts. I thought about kidnapping you to a deserted island

where you'd be forced to talk to me and I could eventually win you back with my wit and charm. And maybe with a few little games too.

But you said you didn't want any of that shit; you said you wanted to know me. So I'm going to tell you about me, as best I can, all the stuff that I would have had the chance to share with you on dates, in bed, over the normal amount of time we should have together. I don't know what I did to mess up. Maybe it was the divorce. Maybe it was school. Maybe you were telling the truth, although I can't shake the feeling that there is something more. But if you won't tell me what changed between our last night together and the following morning, so be it.

I meant what I said, Red. You're it for me. I'll never stop chasing you. So this is me, and if I have to write you an encyclopedia a month for the rest of my life, I'll make it my life's work to make you fall in love with me again. I know I can be that man for you, Skylar. If you'll let me.

I love you. Always.

Do you love me yet, Red?

B

They varied in length after that, from one page up to fifteen at the longest, each bearing a simple story that told me who he was. Memories from his childhood, good and bad. The feeling he had when he stepped into his first seminar at MIT. How he started his company. The one time he went looking for his mother again. When he found out she had died. The

moment he knew he wasn't in love with Meredith. How he felt when he married her anyway.

Some were easy and light, and others were incredibly difficult to read. But I read them—I couldn't help it. And every single one ended the exact same way:

I love you. Always.

Do you love me yet, Red?

B

“Aren't you going to open it?” Kyra, a girl from our seminar who was also Eric's latest flavor of the month, pointed her beer bottle at the package. “What did you get?”

I set the letter aside and picked up the box—the first one he'd left since the chain of mail began. Slowly, I lifted open the small white lid, and found a bracelet sitting on a tuft of linen.

It wasn't a Tiffany's box, which was the first thing I thought. The bracelet looked nothing like anything you'd find there anyway. It was a sturdy, simple, sterling silver cuff, about an inch wide and solid through. It bore the obvious impressions of hand pounding across the top, but when I picked it up, I noticed that the inside had been polished smooth in order to bear an inscription:

“One man loved the pilgrim soul in you,” I read aloud softly. I gulped. Somehow I didn't think the bar would be the best place to subject myself to Brandon's latest letter.

“Nice,” Eric said as he nodded at the bracelet. “Yeats.”

I looked back down at the inscription and back up with confusion. “I don’t know it.” Other than the required literature course I took in college, I wasn’t particularly well read in poetry, generally preferring novels over ballads in what little spare time I had to read.

Eric closed his eyes with a smile and recited the poem:

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

When he opened his eyes back up, the entire table had gone silent, and everyone was staring at him, astonished. Kyra looked like she was ready to devour him alive.

Eric looked around and shrugged. “English major. I wrote my honors thesis on Yeats.”

He took a long slug from his beer, and the conversations around the table erupted again. Kyra turned to Eric with obvious tears, which he studiously ignored. Well, if he wasn’t getting any before, he certainly would be later.

“So, Crosby, who’s the dreamer?” he asked, nodding at the bracelet still clasped in my hand.

I looked down at the gleaming silver, then hastily stuffed it in my bag along with the letter. Yeah, there was no way I was going to be able to read the latest installment of “Brandon Sterling Reveals His Soul” without tears after listening to the poem Brandon had quoted on a piece of jewelry. Pilgrim soul indeed.

“It’s no one,” I said quickly, tipping back the rest of my beer and quickly reaching for the pitcher. Eric watched with amusement, knowing I wasn’t usually given to binge drinking or cheap beer.

“No?” he asked. “It’s not a certain Beacon-street dweller who—”

“It’s *no one*,” I repeated sharply, cutting Eric off before he could rouse the attention of the whole table to the state of my love life. I quickly poured another half pint down my throat to avoid my friend’s knowing look. Jane gave me a sympathetic

smile from the end of the table; she knew she'd likely be getting me a cab at the end of the night.

I picked up the empty jewelry box that was still sitting on the table and turned to stow the bracelet along with the letter, but I stopped as the inner inscription caught my eye again. My head was already swimming with too much cheap alcohol, and for once, I didn't want to push away my feelings I'd been fighting for the last six weeks. Giving myself permission not to think about it too much, I picked up the cuff and slipped it onto my wrist before tucking the box into my bag.

I ignored Jane's gaze on my wrist as I raised my hand to beckon the waitress over to the table.

"Anyone up for another few rounds?" I asked my friends, and with jovial assent, the bracelet and its origins were quickly forgotten.

~

Jane and her "classmate" dropped me off in a taxi at our building after I reassured her at least five times that I was fine. She kept looking pointedly at my wrist and asking again, but I finally convinced her that maybe it would be better for me to read the stupid letter by myself this time. Half-soaked with cheap beer and tequila shots, I had a feeling the letter would make me cry—really ugly cry—and I preferred to do that sort of thing alone.

I plodded out of the elevator on our floor more than a little tipsy for the three more beers and two shots I'd enjoyed at the bar, and found myself disappointed that yet again, Brandon Sterling was not waiting for me outside my door. Again. It was strange to admit that for the last six weeks I'd been hoping to

turn around to find him stalking me. I'd checked every lamp post, every stupid doorway twice before leaving classroom buildings, T-stops, or even the library. But he was never anywhere to be found. Only his letters.

Resigning myself to being alone, I unlocked the door, slung my bag on the counter, and went about removing my ankle boots and light leather jacket. I immediately dug around the cupboards for the bottle of McCallan 18 I kept for special occasions and poured myself two fingers worth. This was the first piece of jewelry I'd ever accepted from a man, so it deserved a celebratory drink, right? Or so I managed to justify it to myself, although deep down I was looking for more liquid courage to read this letter.

I brought the drink and the letter in my bedroom and collapsed on top of my pillows with my back against the headboard. After taking a healthy sip of the scotch, I set down my glass and ripped open the envelope with my finger.

Dear Skylar,

Today is your last day of classes, and on Monday you'll finish with school. You'll be studying for the bar (sorry about that), but essentially you're on the precipice. I remember that feeling. It's exhilarating, a combination of the knowledge of your own accomplishments paired with the thrill of moving on to the next chapter, the next dream of your life.

When I graduated law school, my dreams were all business. I was going to continue to grow my own business, but I was going to devote more of my time to helping people who needed representation get it. I dreamed of building a

legacy to which I could attach my name. I dreamed of my own building, my own staff, my own investments. I had a new kind of freedom I'd never had before—the power to be my own voice. But by that point I was already married to a woman I didn't love—couldn't love, and we soon found out we would not be able to have the family we thought we wanted. Eventually my dreams were only in the head, not the heart.

Then I met you, and my heart started to beat again. I could imagine a different kind of future. I saw us together, married maybe, raising a family or traveling the world. Pursuing our careers and coming home to each other. Growing old with each other.

It's been six weeks. I thought at first that time would make my heart disappear again. Instead, being without you has only made me understand just how much you changed me. Now I understand how much I am truly capable of loving. I still dream that you might let me love you again. For now, I'm content to wait.

This will be the last letter. You deserve to pursue your dreams on your own without being chased. But should you ever want to share those dreams with me again, Red, I'll be waiting to start the chase again. Because, Red, you are the heart of my dreams.

Do you love me yet?

I'll wait. And I'll always love you.

B

I stared at the letter through tear-glossed eyes, afraid to move for fear it would unleash a tidal explosion of weeping.

“Damn,” I whispered. “Oh, *damn*.”

With a final gulp of the rest of my scotch, I pushed myself up from the bed and stumbled into the kitchen. Almost violently, I dug through my bag in search of my phone. Once I found it, I quickly scrolled to Brandon’s contact and pressed dial before I could talk myself out of it.

His deep voice answered on the second ring.

“Skylar?”

I tried not to thrill at the obvious excitement in his voice, but it was useless. The kitchen light caught on my new bracelet, and my heart quaked at the words I knew were inscribed next to my wrist.

“Hey,” I said softly into the phone. “I...ah...” Suddenly I had no idea what to say. “I got your present.”

“Oh.” His voice, thought deep, was also soft and tentative. “Did you open it?”

I nodded before I could remember through my whiskey-fog that he couldn’t see me. “Yes,” I said. “It’s...well, I’m wearing it. It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

“It was made by a friend of Susan’s,” he said. “She’s a local silversmith, and I gave her a loan a while back to help her start a business.”

Why did I break this off again? I walked over to the freezer and removed a bag of peas, holding it against my

forehead in hopes of shocking myself awake with the cold. It didn't work.

“Well, it's beautiful,” I said again. “I love it.”

“Well, I love you, so that's fitting.”

My heart again picked up a few beats at his matter-of-fact words. I shut my eyes, willing myself to be normal. Why, why did he have to be so amazing?

“You're not going to make this easy on me, are you?” I asked.

Brandon chuckled. “Not my style, Red, although you're not exactly a pushover yourself.”

“I want to see you,” I blurted out before I could tell myself not to. I pushed the peas against my forehead and squinted my eyes in pain at the thought of my idiocy. Jesus, *what* was I doing?

“Brandon?” I asked when I realized he hadn't answered. “Are you there?”

He exhaled a long, audible breath before answering.

“Yeah, Red, I'm here,” he said softly. “When?”

I shook my head, willing my foggy brain to think rationally. No time, this was a mistake, I don't want to see you—I needed to say *that!*

“How about lunch?” I said instead. God, I was helpless. My stupidity was surreal, like watching a car wreck happen while I was the driver.

“I'll meet you at The Yard at one,” he said in a brusque tone I couldn't quite read. “See you then.”

Before I could answer, he ended the call. I stood in the kitchen for a solid fifteen minutes, staring at the black screen on my phone and wondering what I had just gotten myself into.

~

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Chapter 43

At five minutes before one, I found myself pacing outside of The Yard, a chic bar-turned-restaurant that was built into the corner of one of the endless old brick buildings around Harvard Square. It boasted windows that could be opened like garage doors, pulling up into the ceiling of the place to connect the dark, modern interior with the heavily trafficked sidewalk, giving the place a pleasant al fresco atmosphere during balmy days like today.

It was a typically warm spring afternoon in Boston. After spending more time than I cared to admit rifling through my wardrobe, I ended up walking to the restaurant in just a short-sleeved, cornflower-blue shift dress made of eyelet lace that fell to about mid-thigh. I paired it with cognac-colored wedge sandals and the tan suede purse I had bought after making my first big commission on Wall Street. My hair hung in waves down my back, and I basked in the scents of blooming flowers all the way to the front of the restaurant. I paused before entering, taking a moment to mentally prepare myself. Somehow, I had a feeling this single conversation had the potential to change the rest of my life.

“You know, I think I’ve only ever seen you in shades of gray or black,” spoke a familiar voice behind me.

I spun around to find Brandon approaching the restaurant.

“Other than that red dress, of course,” he said with a smirk as he leaned down to kiss my cheek. His familiar scent of almonds and soap engulfed me, and I had to stifle a deep inhale.

He was dressed in light gray pants, a black tie, and a white oxford shirt that was casually rolled up at the sleeves. The whole outfit was effortless and sophisticated, tailored in just the right places to accentuate the contrast between his narrow waist and broad shoulders. He waved kindly to David, who nodded from his place at the curb before smiling politely at me.

“Hi David,” I said.

“Ms. Crosby,” he said with another friendly nod. “Sir.”

“I’ll call when we’re finished, David,” Brandon said, and we both watched with undue fascination as David slipped into the driver’s seat of the Mercedes and drove around the corner in search of parking. Brandon turned back to me with a smile. I tugged nervously at the hem of the dress, suddenly wishing I hadn’t chosen something that showed so much leg.

“You cut your hair,” I said through thick lips.

Brandon gave a grim smile and pulled a hand back through his hair, which was now cropped neatly around his next left a bit longer at the top and left to curl instead of being slicked back. “Yeah. Margie finally told me I was starting to look homeless and dragged me to a barbershop. She says it makes me look younger. What do you think?”

I shrugged feigning indifference as best I could. “You look fine,” I said. He looked fucking incredible.

“Well, you look gorgeous,” Brandon replied, as if I wasn’t acting like a sullen teenager. ““As I was saying before, you’re a vision in color, Red. You look like spring.””

“I guess black is more my thing,” I said lamely. “I stand out enough with this hair.” I pulled at a wavy strand of my hair, which was curlier than normal in the late spring humidity. By August I’d look like a red-headed Diana Ross if I didn’t plaster it with conditioner.

Brandon caught my hand in his, and brushed my knuckles for a moment before reluctantly releasing it.

“It doesn’t matter what color you wear,” he said in a low, voice, his eyes suddenly burning a brighter blue than my dress could ever be. “You’d stop a man in his tracks anywhere.”

“Please,” I scoffed, but he stopped me with a shake of his head and a sly half grin.

“Well, you stopped me, didn’t you?”

Before I could reply to that, I was tugged into the restaurant, where Brandon gave his name to a visibly balking waitress. She batted her eyes coquettishly at him and gave me a look that was pure jealousy before trotting in front to guide us to a small table in the back patio.

The restaurant was typically busy for a spring Saturday, full of parents visiting with their kids pre-graduation and older students and faculty celebrating the end of the term. Brandon pulled out my chair before taking a seat across from me. I took in the charming space on the brick exterior, which was lined with potted plants and scattered with iron-wrought tables.

“Scotch?” Brandon asked.

I gulped. I was still feeling the after effects of drinking way too much the night before, but he didn’t need to know that.

“I’ll just have a glass of the rosé, please,” I said to the hostess.

“Whatever local IPA you have on draft,” Brandon said. “Thanks.”

The hostess batted her eyelashes at him again while she handed us our menus, then sashayed off with a distinct sway of her backside. I looked up to find Brandon’s deep blue eyes pinned squarely on me, not having even noticed the obvious show for his benefit. He raised an eyebrow, then lowered his gaze to the menu.

We both studiously ignored each other while placing our orders with the waiter—a Cobb salad for me, and a pastrami sandwich for Brandon. Once we’d been served our drinks, Brandon watched with no little amusement as I quickly gulped down nearly half the sweet, chilled wine in one go before I could find the courage to look back at him.

“Something on your mind, Red?” he asked with a chuckle.

I pursed my lips. “Why do you ask?”

“Well,” he said, leaning forward as if to whisper a secret to me. “You did ask me to meet you.”

God, he smelled good. I had almost forgotten that amazing scent of his—a mix of expensive soap, almonds, and a tinge of metal, the remnants of his secret hobby that was dead giveaway to his gentlemanly façade. For a second, I wanted to do nothing more than leap over the table and bury my face in his neck right there in front of the entire restaurant. I’d rip open his shirt so I could get my hands on the washboard abs I knew were hiding under those buttons, and have my way with

him until he was completely out of my system. Momentarily dizzy, I focused on getting that particular image out of my brain, and took another large gulp of wine to ground myself.

“I just...I felt bad,” I said lamely. “About the way things ended. And I wanted to thank you for this.” I pulled the white jewelry box out of my purse and pushed it across the table. “It’s beautiful. It really is. But you know I can’t accept it, Brandon.”

“And...there it is,” Brandon replied dryly. He looked at the box, but made no move to talk it, instead taking a swig of his beer. “Come on, Red, let’s not start that bullshit again, all right?”

“I don’t want to give you the wrong idea!” I blurted out. Did he not understand how hard it was for me to do this?

All signs of a smirk erased from his handsome features, Brandon set his beer down and leaned over. He reached both hands across the table to grasp mine gently, brushing his thumbs lightly across my knuckles.

“This isn’t like the Tiffany’s garbage or that stupid trip to Paris, Red,” he said. “It’s not even like the piano, which I meant well, but didn’t really know anything about. This is personal. I had this made especially for you because the artist’s work reminded me of you. It’s strong and solid like you are, not dainty and weak. But it’s beautiful, and that’s because its imperfections make it so unique. Whether or not I ever convince you what I know—what I *know* in my heart, Skylar, to be true, that we’re meant for each other—I want you to have it, all right? Call it your graduation gift from your old boss if it makes you feel better, but I’m not taking it back.”

He released one of my hands and used his free hand to open the box and take out the bracelet, which he immediately pressed onto my other wrist. His fingers lingered over the delicate skin of my inner palm, but eventually he released that hand as well.

“Better,” he said, sitting back again and taking another drink of beer.

Before I could reply, the waiter arriving with our food. Having skipped breakfast in the wake of my hangover, I realized I was famished, and dug in immediately. Brandon ate with his usual voracity. It was several minutes before either of us slowed down enough to talk again.

He seemed content enough to make small talk through the rest of the meal, allowing me to avert my gaze when his burning one was too much for me to bear. He asked politely about school, about my family, and about where I was planning to work when I was finished.

“I, ah...” I wasn’t actually sure I should tell him.

“Will it be Kieran’s firm or the D.A.’s office?” he asked directly after polishing off the rest of his sandwich.

My mouth dropped open, causing him to grin at my response.

“Friends in high places, Red,” he said with a grin. “So which is it going to be? They’d both be damn lucky to have you, although if I had my way, you’d still be the newest litigator at Sterling.”

I finished my last bite of my salad and pushed the large plate to the side of the table. “Well, if you must know, I’ll be

leaving Boston right after graduation.” Then the decision came out of my mouth before I even knew I’d made it. “I’m taking the job with the district attorney.”

Brandon looked at me with a strange expression that looked like pride mixed with sadness. The blue gaze shot like a laser to the center of my heart, where I thought I had done a good job of patching up the breaks I’d endured since leaving him. No, Brandon Sterling definitely still had the ability to cut right to the quick of me with just one look. He raised his water glass to me in a small, sad salute. Once again, I had to fight myself not to jump over the table and kiss the obvious melancholy off his handsome face.

“Good for you, Red,” he said before taking a small sip. “I’m sure your family will be happy to have you back.”

Before I could reply, our server arrived with the check, which Brandon paid with a hundred-dollar bill without even glancing at the final tally. Our meal couldn’t have cost more than half that.

“Come on,” he said, standing up suddenly and reaching out for my hand. “Let’s take a walk. I don’t know when I’ll see you again.” He glanced at me and leaned down so I couldn’t avoid his piercing blue stare. A lock of dark blond hair flopped onto his forehead, and I fought the urge to muss up the rest just to feel its softness once more.

“Please?” he asked, holding his hand flat out for me.

I sighed. “All right,” I said, and let him pull me up from my chair and out of the restaurant. I tried and failed to ignore the electricity passing between our fingers as he gripped my hand so hard I thought he might never let go.

~

“So, I have something to show you,” Brandon said as we walked amiably into Riverside Park and down to the Charles, where the crew team was out for its afternoon practice. It was the same route we’d taken several times before—the same route he took for his morning runs and occasionally dragged me along on the weekends. There was the bench where he’d given me his sweatshirt...the tree trunk where he’d cornered me under the sunlight just a few weeks ago and started—

I shook my head, erasing the memories that kept flooding back. No good could come from reminiscing now.

He hadn’t let go of my hand since leaving The Yard, but did so now to withdraw a folded piece of paper from his pocket. He had rolled up his shirtsleeves in the restaurant, and now the face of his Rolex gleamed against his tanned skin in the bright May sun. His forearm flexed as he handed the paper to me.

“What’s this?” I scanned the document. It appeared to be a photocopy of an agreement signed by both him and Miranda—an agreement to meet for arbitration in a month to finalize a settlement.

“It’s binding, that’s what. Once we leave that room, we’re done for good.”

I looked up and handed the document back to him. “Why now?”

Brandon sighed. “Because it’s time. Because I threatened to take it to trial if she didn’t, and my bluff paid off. She doesn’t want this public any more than I do. Miranda has been

incredibly stubborn about all of it. She said it's because she's Catholic, but I don't really think that's why she hasn't signed anything so far."

I snorted. "No, it wouldn't be. Not with billions of dollars at stake."

He continued as if I hadn't said anything. "Half of Boston is Catholic. I thought it wouldn't matter. I didn't mind supporting her, not really, and I figured I'd never want to marry anyone again anyway, so what did it matter if I stayed married to her? Technically, anyway. But then...well, you read my letters. At least I hope you did."

"Yes, I read them." I kicked a rock off the path with my toe and watched it tumble down the sloping grass toward the river. The idea of him staying married caused a ringing in my ears, and the intensity of what he was implying made my heart pound so hard that I tried hard to block out by focusing on the crunch of gravel under my feet. *Victor Messina. Victor Messina.* I chanted the name in my mind to keep myself from wrapping my arms around Brandon's neck.

"So now she's suddenly going to agree?" I asked.

Brandon shrugged. "We talked. I told her...I told her that I'm ready to move on." His eyes softened at me briefly, but he wisely chose not to pursue that line of thinking. Instead, he slapped his hands together and rubbed his palms as if preparing for battle. "It's not going to be cheap, that's for sure. She's angry and has new hotshot representation from Stern and Bouvier. You know them?"

I nodded. Everyone knew them. They were the most cutthroat divorce lawyers in the city, the kind of attorneys who

encouraged their clients to throw around false accusations of domestic abuse and the like to earn sympathy in court. They would dig up every piece of dirt on Brandon Sterling they could find and reframe him with the arbitrator to make him seem like the worst husband possible. It wouldn't matter that Massachusetts was a no-fault state—there were lots of ways to gain sympathy.

“Please tell me you're not going to self-represent,” I said.

“Why, you want to be my lawyer?”

I snorted again. “Seriously, Brandon, you're going to be smart about it, aren't you? You have to keep your mouth shut. They'll make you look like an ass without blinking an eye.”

“You sound like my lawyers.” His mournful half smile made me want to wrap my arms around him and tell him he'd be all right; as an alternative, I crossed them around my waist as we continued to walk.

“You know I've already retained counsel,” he said. “Don't worry. It's not me.”

“Kieran.” It was a statement. I'd already pieced that together, and I remembered seeing her name on the original divorce documents.

“And a few others. You actually saw them the night we met.”

“Why don't you hire someone from Sterling?” It was odd, really, that he wouldn't keep his money in the firm.

“It would be like hiring your brother to be your sex therapist.”

I stifled a laugh.

“Plus, I needed someone I could trust, and that’s Kieran. Anyway, our family law department needs a little work.” He gave me another sly look. “Actually, that was one reason I was hoping you’d come to us after the internship. But I guess we’ll have to settle for that fool from BC. He doesn’t have your legs, but he’ll be fairly merciless.”

I couldn’t help but smile a little. He really did track all the new hires. I looked away so he couldn’t see the flood of red I could feel rising up my throat. It didn’t matter. I’d already decided I wasn’t going to be a part of this.

“Something wrong?”

I sighed and stopped, looking out to the river. It was uncharacteristically warm for early May, and most of the trees on the waterfront were already a mix of blossom and bright green leaves. New growth. New beginnings. I stepped off the path and onto the grass so we wouldn’t be in the way of oncoming runners and other people taking strolls by the river with their families. The soft grass gave slightly beneath my heels.

“I think it’s great that you’re trying to move on,” I said slowly.

“But?”

I took a deep breath. I could do this. I had to focus on the water and avoid the magnetic pull of those baby blues.

“But I think I need to focus on what’s important in my life right now,” I said, making sure each word was perfectly

enunciated. I didn't want any confusion. "That's moving back to New York, passing the bar, and starting my new job."

"And you don't think I could help you with any of that?"

I could hear the smirk on his face rather than see it. He had already offered to give me a job multiple times, if only to keep me close. I knew that. Images of him helping me study for the bar naked popped into my head, and I cursed myself for enjoying the idea of his particular form of persuasion and being unable to keep the smile off my face. I shook my head. We weren't together any more, and weren't ever going to be.

"No," I blurted out. "I'm sorry, but no. I don't need any more distractions. I've worked too hard to get here, and I need to do this for myself. You're wonderful, Brandon, truly." Mentally I kicked myself at the crack that resounded through my voice.

We had stopped walking, and stood there for a moment, me looking out at the river and the crew team passing by again, him staring a hole right through me. No wonder the guy had made his fortune twice over as an attorney; he could probably intimidate just about any answer he wanted out of anyone.

Finally, I found the courage to look up.

"What?" I asked weakly. "What is it that you want?"

"I want to know why you're being such a damn chicken," he said softly, his voice barely carrying over the breeze coming off the river. "I don't know what's stopping you from doing what you and I both know is the right thing to do, but

it's not this damn divorce. It's all but over. It's been over for years. So what is it, Skylar? What's really holding you back?"

I shook my head frantically back and forth as the tears I never wanted to show anyone came welling up without provocation.

"I just can't," was all I could say in the low, creaky voice that probably revealed every emotion I was desperately holding at bay. But I didn't want to tell him I knew about his payoff to the Mafia. For all I knew, he worked for them too, and the less he thought I knew, the better. These people didn't take kindly to others knowing their business, and even though I knew Brandon would never do me any harm, it was best he could answer truthfully should Messina ask if I knew about him.

"So all that time didn't mean shit to you, did it?" Brandon's tone suddenly turned nasty as he kicked a polished toe into the grass, uprooting small tufts.

"Of course it did!" I cried out, causing a few passersby to peek at us curiously. "It's just...it's just too much, Brandon. I told you that!"

He grabbed my hand and yanked me further down the small slope, down to the water's edge, where our voices might be muffled a bit more.

"Obviously it didn't mean that much," he said bitterly as he released my hand. "I meant what I said, Skylar. You're it for me. You're all I want. But when I tell you I fucking love you, that I want to marry you, you're out the door the next fucking morning. Did you forget that you said it too? Did you forget how good you felt in my arms, in my bed, up against the

wall in your shower, baby? You and I both know that if it weren't for this, this, bullshit!" He snatched the arbitration agreement from his pocket and shook it wildly in the air. "If it weren't for this, you'd be flat on your back on my kitchen table, screaming my name out so the whole Commons can hear me take you five different ways before dinner!"

My hand flew out and smacked him across the cheek before I could contain the action. He brought a calloused palm up and touched the red handprint I'd left, visibly shocked, his eyes burning bright with words he hadn't yet said.

"You don't get to talk to me like that," I spat. "Like having me is some kind of right you're entitled to, you spoiled, selfish prick!"

"Not a right, baby, just a need. I need you like I need air to breathe, so you're damn right I'm going to fight for it!"

We were chest to chest, so close if I had been a few inches taller our noses might have brushed. He inhaled deeply, and his eyes drifted south down to rest on my lips. His fingers twitched impatiently at his sides. He was fighting every instinct he had, as was I, and our bodies were literally vibrating with the urge to collide. With immense effort, I took a step back.

"This was a mistake. This lunch, this meeting, you, me." I yanked off the bracelet and dropped it at his feet. "It was all a fucking mistake."

I hoisted my purse over my shoulder and scrambled back up to the path toward campus before I could be drawn further into his penetrating gaze. Whatever I was looking for by

meeting with him today, it didn't matter. I was leaving. Closure accomplished.

“Shit. Skylar! Please, don't do this!”

The crack in his voice almost had me turning back around, but his comments still burned in my ears. I tossed an errant hand into the air with more bravado than I actually felt and continued to stride away, willing myself not to look back. Just a few more steps until I was out of the park and could get lost in the crowded sidewalk. Just a few more steps until I could start the long process of forgetting that Brandon Sterling ever existed.

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Chapter 44

A knock on my bedroom door pulled me out of my daze, the same daze I'd been drifting in all week. Five days since that explosive fight by the river. Just over six weeks since those monumental words had drifted out of Miranda's mouth. "His wife." Who knew two little words could pack such a damn punch?

"Skylar? You ready to go?"

Jane's tentative tone pulled me out of my ugly daydreams, just as it had been doing all week, forcing me to pack up my things and get ready for graduation. It was the first time I had ever let my personal life interfere with my professional (or scholarly) goals. I hadn't even started studying for the bar, with just under two months to go until the exam. I gave the D.A.'s office a verbal commitment directly after seeing Brandon for the last time, but I hadn't had the heart to think about anything law-related since. The new hire paperwork was in my messenger bag, still unsigned. Two hefty study guides for the bar exam were packed into my suitcases with my clothes, and the rest of my belongings were tucked into heavy brown boxes, ready to ship back to Brooklyn.

The moving company I'd hired would be showing up at five to schlep my boxes of books, clothing, and keepsakes to New York. While studying for the bar, I'd be staying once again in my own room, subject to Bubbe's cooking and the small comforts of home that would help me and my dad recover from our traumatic spring. It should have been a relief, the knowledge I'd have that kind of solace and space to heal.

But my heart felt like lead every time I looked at the brown boxes that reminded me I was leaving Boston for good.

I sighed and turned away from the mirror on the back of my closet door.

“Well?” I asked Jane. “How do I look?”

Jane didn't even have to ask what I meant, but looked me over in a way that had become routine over the last week as she made sure I didn't have any obvious creases in my clothes or crumbs sticking to my face. She stepped into my room and pushed a lock of hair behind my ear, reaching up to affix the black graduation cap that matched her own. Then she pulled the tassel and switched it so it dangled down the correct side of my face.

“There,” she said with a smile. “Perfect. Where are your dad and grandmother meeting you again?”

“On the lawn after the ceremony,” I said. “He had a therapy appointment last night, so they couldn't leave until early this morning. They should be here just in time to see us walk.”

Dad had been taking his therapy seriously, according to Bubbe and his infrequent updates. He didn't say a lot, but it seemed like he was dedicated to the process of making sure his addiction never hurt the family again. He'd also started doing physical therapy for his hand, and seemed to be happy with his doctors.

I let Jane tug me out of the room, past several large bouquets of flowers that had been arriving like clockwork all week. I hadn't wanted to look at the notes that accompanied

them, knowing exactly who they were from, but I didn't have the heart to throw them out. Crimson and white peonies, which were my favorite flower and also matched Harvard colors.

"Tea," Jane said, handing me a to-go cup filled with the brew, which I gratefully accepted.

We had missed the graduate breakfast, since neither of us wanted to get up at six in the morning to eat with everyone else's families. Jane's parents had also flown in from Chicago, but had been more interested in sightseeing around Boston than attending stuffy Harvard events.

"Granola bar for a snack," she said, handing me sustenance. "And a chocolate lobster tail for right now."

"Oh, you peach, you went to Mike's, didn't you?" I tucked the bar into the pockets of my graduation gown and immediately tucked into the flaky pastry, careful not to let the chocolate cream on the inside drip onto my gown.

Jane grinned and bit into her own pastry. We gobbled them down, companionably hunched over the sink. They were gone within seconds, and then we spent a few moments brushing crumbs off the black and crimson gowns.

"I feel so official in this getup," I remarked. "So old-fashioned."

"I feel like a Harry Potter character." Jane looked up and down her robes, pulling out the sides at least two feet on either side. "No one in that book ever gets laid, you know."

"I think that has more to do with them being kids' books than because of their robes," I replied with a chuckle.

“Besides, Harry gets around. Didn’t he have, like, ten girlfriends?”

“True. One of them was Asian too. So, for the wizard contingent, I guess these robes might say ‘come hither’, eh?” Jane reached behind her ear and tipped her glasses up several times, imitating a Groucho Marx impersonator. “Ooh, Harry.”

We fell apart laughing, clutching at the edges of the newly cleaned countertops.

“I’m going to miss you, you know,” Jane said. “I can’t believe this is it. After today...we’re done.”

I grimaced. “Aw, Janey, you’re getting all mushy on me, aren’t you?”

She reached out and smacked me playfully on the shoulder. “Don’t be a bitch, Sky. We’ve been roommates for three years, and now you’re one of my best friends. Where else am I going to find the perfect blend of harsh sarcasm and cold observations to chase every piece of tail away once I’m done with them?”

“Well, who’s going to force me to stop working and act my age? If it weren’t for you, I never would have gone to a single bar in Boston, made friends, fallen in love...”

We both smiled ruefully at each other with the last remark. Jane knew how difficult the last six weeks had been for me. She reached out and squeezed my hand, then released it gently in order to hand me my cap.

“Thanks for taking care of me, Janey,” I said, pulling her toward me for a hug that I knew would surprise her more than

anything. “I’ll miss you too when you go back to Chicago. I’ll visit, I promise.”

She returned my tight embrace with equal fervor. “Um, yeah, you will. And New York is full of hot guys, so you know I’m going to be coming up there too.”

We spoke lightly, but both of us knew it would be a while before we had anything close to resembling vacation time.

“All right, enough with the sob stories,” Jane said as she set me away from her. “Time to jam. The dean’s going to flip her shit if everyone isn’t in line to march exactly at seven-fifteen.”

~

The double ceremony went exactly as the school planned, with the typical march, speeches, and walk of the commencement on the carefully maintained green lawn of Tercentenary Theater. The weather was appreciably balmy, the perfect blend of sun and clouds that would make sitting on the lawn for three hours in boiling black gowns halfway tolerable. The guest speaker was the current governor of Massachusetts, who offered a short, if dull, address, and afterward each school dispersed and made their way to the separated sites for individual diploma ceremonies. By the time I had received my diploma and gone back outside to mingle with my classmates and locate my family, I was both starving and elated by the fact that the day—that the past three years—was finally over.

“Skylar, baby!” I made my way around the hordes of graduates to find my father and Bubbe standing at the edge of the lawn, where they had managed to sit down. Dad was no

longer walking with a cane, and his hand only bore a light splint.

“Hey, Dad. Hey, Bubbe.” I greeted them each with a tight hug and accepted the bouquet of roses that my Dad had obviously purchased from the flower vendors temporarily flanking the Harvard Square T-stop. “When did you get here?”

“Oh, about nine-fifteen,” my dad replied. He smiled at me. “Dang, Pips. I can’t believe we’re here. I’m so proud of you, sweetheart.”

“Come on, come on, come on!” Bubbe waved us together while she held up the small camera she had been using since before I was born.

“Bubbe,” I called as I stepped under my dad’s arm. “You sure you don’t want a digital camera? Or just use Dad’s phone? You’ll save a bundle on film, you know.”

“Pips, I’ve been trying to convince her to do that for the last ten years. She ain’t gonna budge now,” said Dad.

“Smile!” Bubbe ordered, and we accommodated her through at least four different shots before she beckoned my father over to switch places with her.

“So, where is he, *bubbela*?” she asked as she tucked a small arm securely about my waist and reached up to pat at her tightly set brown curls before smiling at my dad. “Take at least four, Daniel, just in case!”

“Where’s who, Bubbe?” I asked, though I knew exactly who she was talking about.

“Don’t play stupid with me, Skylar,” she chastised through clenched teeth. “Your man, your *mensch*. I thought a smart girl

like you would have figured out how to fix things by now.”

Inwardly I wilted, but I outwardly I smiled while my dad fumbled with the camera.

“He’s not here, Bubbe,” I said. “I told you, things didn’t work out.”

I’d had some version of this conversation ever since that night in my bedroom. He’s a *mensch*, she told me, over and over again. They don’t come around every day. I never told her about the bracelet or the letters. It would have only made her resolve to see us reunite that much stronger.

Dad waved his hand to signal that he was finished and walked back to us.

“If that’s true,” Bubbe murmured, “then who’s the gorgeous *goy* who’s been staring at you from under that tree over there? He looks eager enough to me.”

All three of us jerked our heads to one of the large trees that bordered the theater. Brandon, of course, was leaning against it and looking like his entire net worth in a slim fit, charcoal gray suit and blue shirt that looked like it had been dyed to match his eye color. Awkwardly, I raised a hand to wave at him, completely dumbfounded by his presence.

Bubbe, of course, immediately started beckoning him over furiously. “*Oy!* You there, Mr. Moneybags, over here, come congratulate my Skylar.”

Brandon made his way over with a shy smile, and extended his hand politely to my father. “Nice to see you again, Mr. Crosby. Mrs. Crosby.”

Dad, to his credit, snorted at the gesture and politely refused, holding up his casted hand as an excuse. “Brandon, I told you, the only one who calls me Mr. Crosby are collections agents. It’s Danny.”

Brandon switched the hand to my grandmother, who gladly accepted it, albeit with a close inspection of his watch.

“That’s a very nice suit you’re wearing,” she remarked. “Custom made?”

“Bubbe!” I hissed, but she waved my comment away like she was swatting a fly.

Brandon touched his lapel with a shy smile. “That’s right. You have an eye for men’s fashion, Mrs. Crosby?”

“In my own way. My own father was a tailor, you see, so I know the difference between a man in a properly fitted suit and off the rack.”

“Ma, what’s wrong with this?” kidded my dad, who was wearing his very best tweed jacket that he had purchased from Daffy’s when I was a kid. It had been patched twice at the elbows, and the interior lining had been shredding steadily for at least five years.

I linked an arm through his and kissed Dad’s cheek fondly, ignoring the way Brandon tracked the path of my lips through squinted eyelids. “I think you look great, Dad.”

“Thanks, kid,” he said.

“I can’t stay long,” Brandon shuffled back and forth on his feet. It was the middle of a work day—how had he even been able to carve out the time to be here? “I know you’d probably like to go enjoy the rest of your day with your family, Skylar,

and I've got to get back to the office. Mrs. Crosby, Danny, could I talk to Skylar privately for a moment before I go?"

It was all Bubbe could do not to squeal with glee as she ushered my dad over to a row of hedges, out of earshot (only just), but where they could still watch us easily.

I turned back to Brandon. "Hi." I didn't know what else to say.

"Hi, Red," he said softly. "You did great up there."

I couldn't keep the blush rising up my neck and face. "I just walked like every other graduate."

"You finished something important. Something that requires time, energy, and discipline." Brandon replied with another smile that seemed to reach right to my heart and twist. "You should be proud of your accomplishments, Skylar. I am."

We stared at each other a moment while his compliment floated around us. The look on his face—a combination of admiration, worry, and longing—seemed to seal out the rest of the world. I could only see him. My resolve and anger quickly started to melt.

"I'm so sorry I slapped you," I blurted out, reaching down to twist the thick material of my robe nervously in my hand. "I was just really...frustrated by the whole situation. I didn't like what you said, Brandon, but I never should have hit you. I'm so sorry."

He waved a hand in the air, as if to wave away the entire nasty memory. "Don't worry about it, Red. I've had worse, and frankly, I probably deserved it. I was a completely dick;

I'm sorry too." He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out something.

"Here," he said. "This is yours."

He opened his hand and held out the silver cuff I had tossed at him. I stared at it sadly, then looked back up at him, where his expression was open and sorrowful, without much hope. It made me want to wrap my arms around his neck and kiss away his grief. I knew it probably mirrored mine.

"Please, Red. It's your graduation gift. I...I know it's over between us, that you don't want to see me anymore. But I couldn't leave it at that. I hope you understand."

"But, the letters—" I started, about to thank him for them and point out they didn't really demonstrate an acceptance of our end.

"They're done." His mouth curved up on one side in a melancholy half-smile. "Anyway, I don't even know where your new apartment is going to be."

I smiled back. "Well, they were nice. Thank you."

"Take it," he said, holding the bracelet out again. "It'll just remind me of you, and what am I going to do with a ladies' bracelet anyway? You have freakishly small wrists, by the way."

With another rueful smile, I accepted the bracelet and placed it around my wrist, admiring the way it gleamed in the afternoon sunlight. "I think my wrists are perfectly sized."

"Yeah, I guess you are pretty perfect," he said. When I looked up, he was gazing straight at me with a look of such unadulterated desire and love, I couldn't look away. Tears

blurred my eyes, and I immediately reached up to dab them out of the corners.

“Brandon—” I said with a distinct crack in my voice.

“Don’t worry about it, Skylar,” he said, reaching out to wipe another tear from my face. “I know, Red. I get it. I just couldn’t let that be our goodbye.” His thumb trailed the edge of my cheek bone and traced the edge of my jaw until he cupped my face so he could continue to stroke my cheek lovingly, holding me still in a trance with his sad blue gaze.

“Do you think...do you think I could kiss you one more time before you’re gone?” he asked. He smiled. “Do you think your family would freak out?”

I smiled through my tears. “Probably,” I said. I took a deep breath and leaned into his hand. “But I think you should do it anyway.”

He cupped my other cheek with his other hand and tipped my face up to meet his. “I’ll always be glad I met you, Skylar Crosby,” he said. “You brought me back to life, and I’ll always love you for it.”

Before I could answer, he leaned down and brushed his lips against mine, pressing softly and slowly as if to savor my scent and taste for as long as he could. I opened easily for him, savoring his taste briefly—too briefly!—before he pulled away. He used his thumbs to brush away the new streaks of tears tenderly before releasing me with another brief kiss on my head.

“See you, Red,” he murmured, and turned to weave his way off campus. I watched his tall form disappear through the

crowd while I did my best to breathe. In and out. In and out. It was only once I could no longer distinguish his figure from the rest of the people that I finally turned back to my father and grandmother, preparing to deflect their curious questions. Then I had to figure out, once again, how to be happy now that I had truly said good bye to Brandon Sterling.

~

“I’m just going to bring down this last bag, and then we’ll wait for you in the car, all right?”

I nodded at my dad, who left to load my last suitcase into the back of his old station wagon while I did I final survey of the apartment and said goodbye to my roommate. We had spent the first part of the afternoon celebrating commencement with Jane and her parents, which was mostly my dad and I deflecting Bubbe’s intrusive commentary about Jane’s gothic hairstyle, her parents’ interracial marriage, and the crime rates in Chicago. Afterward, Jane’s parents had left for their hotel, and she and I had gone back to the apartment with my family to wait for the movers and help my dad load up his car.

“Hey, Skylar!” she called from her room. “Do you have any tampons? I seem to have run out.”

“I think so!” I said, walking back to her room and sitting on her bed to rifle through my purse. “I always kept a couple in here, and I don’t remember packing them.”

She waited patiently while I dug through, searching unsuccessfully. This was unlike me not to have any on hand. “Damn, I’m out,” I muttered irritably. “I haven’t bought any since...”

I trailed off as I remembered that I my period had come just after the last night I had spent with Brandon—and hadn't had it since. I looked up at Jane, who turned from where she was looking through her bedside table and froze at my expression.

"It's been six weeks," I croaked, suddenly unable to speak coherently. "I'm late, Jane. It's been six weeks."

Jane flipped around on the bed so she was facing me with crossed legs, and reached out to take my hands and force me to face her as well.

"Okay," she said. "It's probably not that. I mean, you haven't slept with anyone since your period, right?"

"The day before," I said. "The day before I did, that last night with Brandon. And I...shit...we didn't use protection, Jane." I looked up, panicked and wide-eyed. "Jane, I forgot to get my prescription refilled, and we didn't use protection!"

"Calm down." Jane's voice was eerily calm herself as she took my hand. Briefly, I wondered if she'd ever found herself in a similar situation. "My cousin is an OBGYN, Skylar. She assured me that it's nearly impossible to get pregnant the day before your period, since no one actually ovulates on that day. Unless you're irregular or the bleeding was unusually light, there's no way you're pregnant."

The look on my face must have told her that both of those conditions were true. My heart felt like it stopped. Jane took a deep breath in, as if breathing in for us both.

"Shh," she soothed, albeit ineffectually as she rubbed my hand with hers. "It's going to be all right, Sky. It's probably

stress. I've seen you the last few months—you've been miserable and freaked out about graduation and jobs and that shit with your dad. We're all stressed out, starting new jobs and studying for the bar. Plus, you've been swimming like crazy too. You probably just skipped one, you know?"

I leaned down and pressed my face into her comforter. "Oh, God," I mumbled into the cotton fabric. "Fuck! How could I have been so stupid! This could not happen at a worse fucking time!"

"Skylar, stop!" Jane twisted around and tugged open her bedside table. She pulled out a package and threw it into my lap as I sat up.

I picked up the box and read the label. "Why do you have a pregnancy test, Janey?"

"Hey, we've all had false alarms," she said with a shrug. "I'm sure that's what this is, so go take it to be sure and save yourself from getting an ulcer. Go!"

She shooed me out of the room. I shut the door to the bathroom while I read the instructions at least three times before actually sitting on the toilet and peeing on the stick. I slipped the plastic cap over the sturdy paper strip and laid it carefully on the edge of the sink while I washed my hands.

I splashed my face with the cold water and let it drizzle down my cheeks in thin rivulets without stopping them before reaching for the stack of paper napkins we were using after packing away our things. I couldn't be pregnant. I just couldn't.

Without looking at the stick, which wouldn't be ready for another two minutes anyway, I walked back into Jane's room and laid down on my back to stare at the ceiling.

"It's like a bad sitcom," I said dryly. "I'm going to be somebody's baby mama."

"Well, you'll probably be able to get a hell of a deal on child support," Jane joked, cutting off her chuckle when I sent her a sharp glance.

"Gross," I said staunchly. I sat up on my elbow and looked down my torso. "Do I look pregnant? My boobs aren't sore or anything. Some women start to show early."

"Yeah, and others don't show until they're practically in their third trimester," Jane said as she swiped at me with her pillow. "But it doesn't matter, because you're not pregnant, right?"

"Right." I said, ignoring the sinking feeling in my stomach that told me otherwise. The timer on my cell phone went off, signifying that the test was ready. I pulled Jane's pillow over my eyes.

"You go look," I grumbled from under the pillow. "I can't. Please, Jane?"

She didn't say anything, but I heard her shuffle off the bed and across the hall to the bathroom. The door opened, and I listened while she paused for a moment, then trudged back. When her footsteps stopped, I pulled the pillow off my eyes, and looked up to where she stood in the doorway, holding the pregnancy test gingerly between her index finger and thumb.

“Well?” I propped myself back up on my elbows, trying desperately to read her face.

She took a deep breath and tapped the test with her fingernail. “I think...I think you need to make a doctor’s appointment, Mama,” she said sadly as she held out the test for me to see.

“Oh,” I said weakly. I took the test from her fingers. There they were, two incriminating pink lines indicating the tiny cells now multiplying in my body.

“Oh,” I said again as I leaned back on the mattress. *Thank God I’m on a bed*, I thought vacantly before the world lost all its color and I blacked out.

~

To Be Continued...

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I'd like to thank my mom for giving me her sense of romance and whimsy. If it hadn't been for the years and years of watching chick flicks and reading romance novels together, I probably wouldn't have the sense of optimism needed to write romance in a world like today's.

Secondly, I'd like to thank my husband and my family for giving me the support I need to write, even if it's just for twenty minutes a day while the kid is taking a bath. Writing kept me sane in those first crazy years of our life together, and it keeps me present moving forward too. I love you, always.

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And most importantly, I want to thank you, the reader. Skylar and Brandon's journey can't continue without your support and investment. If you enjoyed their story, I

would so, so, so appreciate your review on any of the online retailers through which you purchased this book. I can't do this without you, lovely readers, who are the real muse of these stories.

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About the Author

Nicole French is a lifelong dreamer, hopeless romantic, and complete and total bookworm. When not writing fiction or teaching composition classes, she is hanging out with her family, playing soccer with the rest of the thirty-plus crowd in Seattle, or going on dates with her husband. In her spare time, she likes to go running with her dog, Greta, or practicing the piano, but never seems to do either one of these things happen as much as she should.

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Coming Soon from Nicole French

***Downtown Baby* (Book 1 in the Empire Heart Trilogy)**

As a young college student living it up in gritty heart of New York City, nineteen-year-old Layla Barros doesn't believe in love at first sight. Who needs love when you're living with your three best friends in the greatest city in the world? But all it takes is one look from local boy and all around good guy Nico Sanchez to stop her heart in its tracks. So what if he's a decade older, from a rough part of town, and delivers packages for a living? The heart wants what it wants.

Consummate New Yorker Nico Sanchez has been taking care of everyone else but himself for most of his life. After growing up in the hardscrabble part of Hell's Kitchen, he's worked job after job for the last ten years and has giving up his dream of being an FDNY firefighter in order to take care of his sisters, his brother, and his parents when no one else can. Now that he finally has his shot to leave the Big Apple to find his own success, he meets the girl of his dreams in half-Brazilian student Layla Barros. How is he supposed to choose between the escape he's dreamed of for years and the girl he never knew he always wanted?

As Layla and Nico both come face to face with the challenges of navigating love while trying to make it in a cutthroat city like Manhattan, they must navigate their own personal challenges, families, and backgrounds to figure out whether or not they can really make it work. In a town where

it's as easy to be conned as it is to fly high, can they take a change on what they feel in their hearts? Or is the cost of being together too great if it forces them to sacrifice their dreams?

**Check out the first chapter from
Downtown Baby below!**

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Chapter 1

I step out of the subway stop on Park Avenue and Twenty-Third Street, my cell phone in hand. Looking straight up Park, I can see the elegant architecture of Grand Central Station; down the other direction, I can see the looming buildings of the Flatiron District. It's one-thirty on a Monday, which means that people bluster around me, hurrying off their lunch breaks to their desks in the tall office buildings that line the massive thoroughfare. Around me I hear Spanish, some kind of Creole, English speakers with multiple accents, all jumbled together with the horns and throttles of cars making their way slowly through the impermeable Manhattan traffic. A few of the nearby corners boast coffee carts and nut vendors, the smells from which gust through the frigid January air. This is New York, chaotic and colorful, a city I have come to adore in the past year and a half I've lived here.

I step out of the line of pedestrians entering and exiting the subway tunnel and check the map on my phone. It's my first day at a new job, which, according to my phone, is about two blocks south of where I stand. Plenty of time to get there. I glance around for a Starbucks or something similar; I'd like to have a coffee, but the cheap drudge from the carts makes my stomach hurt if I have too much. I already had two cups before my eight o'clock classes this morning, so I'm at my limit for what my roommate Quinn dubs "Borough Battery Acid."

"Pardon, miss."

A deep baritone voice behind me interrupts my thoughts, and I instinctively twist around, eager to get out of its owner's

way. The stereotype about people from New York is that they're mean, but that's wrong. It's just that there are certain social codes everyone from here knows—codes like “Don't stand like an idiot in the middle of a busy sidewalk”, “Don't stand in front of the subway car doors during rush hour if you're not getting off at the next stop”, and “Never, ever drive your car through a crosswalk when pedestrians are walking there.” “I'm walking here!” is a real phrase; I've used it myself. In a city of eight million people all stuffed into a few square miles, no one has the patience for the ones who don't know the rules.

Apparently right now that's me.

“Sorry,” I say quickly, but the speaker, a FedEx courier, is obscured by a tall tower of boxes stacked on a dolly, which he is trying to maneuver through the crowded subway.

“No problem,” he booms, and pushes past me, giving me an excellent view of a set of large shoulders and a prize-worthy backside. I swear, the way some men's asses look in a uniform should seriously be illegal. Sometimes I wish that catcalling were normal for women to do, not just men. It would level the playing field a bit, plus it would be really satisfying to whistle after an ass like that.

Curious to see if his face is as good looking as the rest of him, I watch to see if he'll turn around, but he just continues moving through the crowd, going doggedly about his business like everyone else. I shrug and check my phone again. Time for my business too. When I glance back up, a small café on the corner catches my eye, and I smile. Just enough time for a coffee to start my first day of work off right.

~

“Fox, Lager, and Associates, how may I help you?”

The receptionist’s voice rings out loud and clear while I wait in the small conference room behind the donut-shaped desk facing the elevator door entrance in the lobby. The office is cool and modern, with blonde wood floors and sleek furnishings throughout, accented by brushed metal fixtures. The two name partners, Steven Fox and Gerald Lager, pose with boy bands and pop singers in the dozens of photos that line the walls, interspersed with multiple gold and platinum records from said artists.

I sit alone at the long, oval table in the conference room, peering at each of the pictures and trying to distract myself from the nerves on the first day of my new part-time job. Unfortunately, the perfect, white-toothed celebrity faces only make me feel that much more self-conscious. This is an entertainment law firm, where everyone here works for perfect-looking people and look like that could be one of them. The current receptionist who greeted me looks like she could be doing spreads at Vogue. Even the photos of the partners, who are both easily over fifty, strongly resemble GQ ads. I, on the other hand, with my short, curvy stature and thick, curls that defy control most of the time, don’t look anything close to a fashion model. I’m cute, sure. Striking on a good day, when I get my makeup right and my blue eyes pop against my black hair and tan skin. But I’m no beauty queen and don’t pretend to be.

I was hired as a new receptionist/intern at Fox and Lager last week. It’s my first job in a law firm, the kind of job I hope

will look good on law school applications in a few more years. I'm the perfect candidate for a low-level internship: nineteen, in my second year at NYU, pursuing a double major in English and Journalism. I want to be an attorney, preferably working with creative types like some of the clients whose faces double as room decorations for Fox and Lager. I know I'm not expected to have any real legal experience before attending law school, but it wouldn't hurt to get a feel for the business. Working at an entertainment management firm seems like a good place to start.

“Layla?”

I look up from my chair in the waiting area to where Karen, the office manager, stands in the doorway between the receptionist desk and the conference room. Even at first glance, you know Karen is the kind of woman you don't want to fuck with. A thirty-something woman with a business degree and a penchant for very high-heeled boots, Karen was born and raised in the Boogie-Down—the Bronx. She's the third child out of five in a very tight family of Puerto Ricans who operated a lot of the hot dog carts in Central Park, or so the other receptionist informed me in hushed tones after my interview the week before. She's also the first of her family to go to college, and she didn't mess around, graduating summa cum laude from NYU's school of business before starting her job here. These are all such critical elements of her personality that she divulged them to me during my interview the week before. It was a scare tactic, I think—she thinks I'm just a rich kid from the suburbs like so many of my classmates, and she wants me to be afraid of my boss.

But we're more alike than she realizes. Like my dad, a native from Brazil, Karen takes major pains to erase any residue of her less than affluent upbringing, mostly through appearance. She wears shoes that no office manager in Manhattan has any business buying, and the waterfall of straight, caramel-colored satin that falls from her head is most likely a very sleek and expensive way of taming hair that probably looks a lot like mine naturally. Her sleek, designer outfit makes my H&M pencil skirt and polka-dotted blouse seem outright dowdy in comparison. I pull at the hem of my skirt as I stand up, suddenly conscious of my less-than immaculate appearance.

“Are you ready for your training?” Karen asks.

I nod, holding up my pad of paper and pen I've brought to take notes. “Absolutely.”

The only thing Karen can't mask is her speech. A thick Bronx accent curves over every word. I wonder if she doesn't secretly like it, since she doesn't work to erase it like my dad does. It probably only adds to the overall intimidation factor to suburban kids like me.

Mostly people in Washington, where I grew up, only know New York from the movies. They think everyone here talks like Robert De Niro or Jay-Z, and are as tough as any character in a Scorsese film. I thought that too, but Karen doesn't know where else I grew up. She only knows what's on my resume, the address of a cookie cutter house outside of Seattle. She doesn't realize that the suburbs aren't the only place I think of as home, that I've spent most of my summers in Brazil, helping my dad volunteer medical aid in the favelas

when I wasn't at the beach with my cousins. The Bronx doesn't scare me at all.

As she leads me through the halls of the small office—the rest of the floor behind the conference area contains only ten proper offices and a small pod of desks for the assistants, paralegals, and clerks—Karen lectures me on my duties as an intern. I listen and take notes on the legal pad. In my experience, new employers love it when their employees take notes. Meanwhile, I can still look curiously at my surroundings and notice the two handsome young attorneys working at small desks just around the corner from the receptionist's desk. Hmm. Eye candy.

The job is cake. I'm to manage the coffee maker, of course, but I'll also be in charge of sending and receiving mail, stocking office supplies, sending and receiving faxes and, of course, answering the phones. Invigorating stuff, I know. My shift will be from two o'clock until seven o'clock every day, and because I'll be the last one to leave the office, so I'll need to lock up the elevator with building security after leaving through the emergency stairwell. I'll clock in and out through the computer's timecard system, and if I need to go to the bathroom, I should message Karen's assistant, Clarice.

Every so often on our tour, Karen stops and looks at me sharply, squinting her eyeliner-laden lids as if examining me for character defects or inability to understand these basic tasks. I just nod, jot a few more details, and we continue with the training.

The office is constructed like a horse shoe, with Karen's and the partners' offices lining the exterior arc. Inside the

shoe, junior associates, assistants, and one intern all sit at small wooden desks, which are blocked off from the front lobby and reception area by the conference room in the middle of everything. Karen takes me on a brief tour to meet all of the lawyers, and then we circle back to the lobby, where Sarah, the morning receptionist is answering phones.

“Sarah will continue training you for your first shift today,” Karen informs me, tapping her long, manicured nails on the lacquered wood bar rimming the receptionist desk. “After that, you’re on your own. Think you can handle it?”

I blink and smile. “Got it.”

I don’t care for the condescension, but I’m not about to tell Karen that. She seems like the type who, when it really comes down to it, wouldn’t mind breaking a few of those pretty nails on someone’s face if they cross her the wrong way. I doubt I’m going to love this job, but I definitely don’t plan for that person to be me.

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The training is simple enough—after all, answering phones isn’t exactly rocket science. I learn quickly the politics of sending clients to the partners. Steven Fox, for instance, is hardly ever in the office, and I’m never, ever to forward calls directly to his cell phone unless it’s Katie Derek, the pop superstar and the firm’s number one client. Everyone else is to be directed through Fox’s assistant, Jed, who always seems to be on the phone and yet can somehow accept multiple calls at the same time. I learn quickly where the paper is kept and how to send an outgoing fax. Like I said, not rocket science. If I have nothing to do in between phone calls, I’m allowed to

study or read. It becomes increasingly clear as the afternoon draws into the evening that I'm going to have plenty of time for that. No problem here; who doesn't want to get paid to study?

Sometime around six o'clock, Sarah and I is catching me up on office gossip when the elevator doors open. Although several clients and couriers have already arrived during my shift, this is the only one that causes Sarah to tense in her chair and start blushing. It's odd, considering how many famous people come by here on a regular basis. I watch curiously as she flushes, the stolidly pale demeanor she assumed throughout the afternoon replaced by a girlish pink. Who gets this kind of treatment?

"Oh, ah, hi, Nico," Sarah stammers almost a little too loudly.

I suppress a chuckle, and shuffle my training notes before I look up to greet this Nico person, whoever he is. A client, I'm guessing, but I've never heard of anyone famous by that name. It's then that I feel as if the air is completely gone from my chest and I've been hit hard by a large sack of bricks. Literally, that's what it's like. As if someone slapped me hard across the face. Or submerged my body in a bucket of numbing ice water. My vision actually blurs, and I can't feel my legs.

He is so unbelievably beautiful. I say that instead of sexy or handsome or good-looking because these words don't cover it. They're too external, too superficial for the kind of draw I feel from this man right now. His appeal could obviously make a nun toss out her habit, and I'm no nun.

On paper, he would probably come across as average at best. A blue collar kid with not much to his name. Obviously no big success career-wise—just a twenty-something FedEx courier. He’s not terribly tall, maybe five-ten in boots, if that. I estimate that in heels I’d probably be eye to eye with him. But money and height don’t equal charisma, and he’s got that in spades.

His lack of height is tempered by a pair of broad, toss-a-girl-over-them shoulders and biceps that ripple clearly, even under the thick, dark fabric of his uniform. His FedEx shirt is rolled up at the cuffs to reveal a set of muscular forearms that are dappled by a few small tattoos trailing up the sleeves. His skin is a delicious olive tone, the color of coffee and rich cream. It’s complemented by a fringe of short black hair that just sticks out from under his FedEx baseball cap, which is curled heavily over a pair of black eyes that twinkle mischievously at Sarah. His dark features, however, only work to highlight the brightest, most thoroughly panty-dropping smile I have ever seen, which he is working to full effect when I look up.

Like I said: a sack of bricks.

“How you doin’, Sarah?”

If his smile causes all the blood to fly straight out of my brain, his voice makes it all flood back in again. I’ve heard it before, and now that I think about it, I actually recognize the shape of those big shoulders. It’s the guy from the street, Mr. Ass of the Year. And his front side *definitely* matches the promise of the back. This guy is serious trouble.

His voice holds traces of the same New York accent that Karen has, but his is softer somehow, muted in the velvety texture of his baritone. It's a gorgeous, deep tone, the kind you want whispering in your ear in some dark alley while he's got you pressed against a brick wall, hands up your skirt, hot mouth nipping at your ear while he—

Steady, girl. You're at work.

I know I'm staring, but it takes me a few seconds to shut my mouth and make sure I can actually move my limbs. Apparently Sarah has better recovery time, since she's standing up when I turn to her.

"Not bad, Nico," she giggles at him. "Today's my last day on the night shift. You gonna miss me when I'm gone?"

"Of course I will, hon," he croons. "Is this the new girl?"

His gaze briefly sweeps up and down from my head down to my waist, which is likely all that's visible from where he stands. I open my mouth to reply, but nothing comes out.

"This is."

Karen's voice confirms his question sweetly from her office to the right of the reception desk, and Nico, Sarah and I all swivel our heads in unison when she strides out. Karen knows how to make an entrance—I'll give her that. Obviously Nico's charm spreads beyond the reception desk. The woman is swaying her hips like a burlesque dancer on ecstasy.

Sarah takes a seat next to me as Karen approaches the desk. We both busy ourselves, sorting blank papers and pens to avoid her gaze. Karen smiles at me, as if she was looking at a

newly rescued kitten and hadn't been grilling me with her unforgiving stare and condescending comments all afternoon.

"Yeah, this is Layla, our new intern receptionist from NYU. We're hoping she'll do all right. How you been, Nico?"

She turns up her accent even more as she speaks, clearly accentuating the local connection they might have. I wonder for a moment if Nico is from the Bronx too.

"Same ol', Karen, you know," he says, flashing that brilliant smile again.

It's a wonder Karen doesn't lose the feeling in her legs just like I did. Sarah and I are safely seated behind the desk—otherwise I'd be grabbing onto the edges for dear life.

"Nothin' changed since yesterday." Nico turns to me and leans over on the desk, extending a hand. "I'm Nico," he says with a grin. "Your friendly neighborhood FedEx delivery man."

Now that the smile is directed at me, I'm genuinely shocked that Karen didn't topple over in her five-inch heels. A pair of deep, incredibly dark brown eyes square on me with bright, obvious intelligence in a way that makes me feel like he can see all the way down to where the five year-old Layla still lives, carefully protected from strangers. Like he can see any secret I've ever kept down there. And the weird thing is, I want him to know every single one of them. Does he want to know about the time I shoplifted candy from the corner market? Or the time I made out with a man in Brazil old enough to be my father just because my cousins had given sixteen-year-old me too many *caipirinhas*? Because I'd tell

him everything and more. I'm suddenly an open book. Wide open.

Instead I clench my thighs together and manage to stick out a hand to shake his, a big calloused paw that feels like it could chuck me over his shoulder and run me out of the office like a marauder he resembles. I'll bet he was a pirate in his last life, pillaging lasses with a wink and a quick nod of the head. Oh, yes, please do.

Somehow I smile back—it turns out his grin is contagious.

“Nice to meet you,” I say through lips that feel like rubber. “I’m Layla. I guess I’ll be seeing you every day at six.” Immediately I feel foolish—Karen literally *just* told him my name, didn’t she?

His smile falters a moment, and he blinks before his grin returns, wider than ever. “I guess you will.”

For a moment we just gaze at each other, still gripping onto the other’s hands tightly. I, for one, have apparently lost all ability to control my body parts once again. On the up side, I could take his lack of movement as an indicator that he apparently feels something similar. At least I hope it’s that and not that I’ve completely held him hostage with my newfound paralysis.

“Ahem.”

Karen clears her throat, and Nico drops my hand, which flops noisily onto my desk. Sarah snorts, and I resist the urge to kick her in the shin—after all, I *did* just meet the girl.

“So, yeah,” Nico says to Karen, glancing at me one last time before he turns to her. “I got few for you today, ladies.”

He sets his clipboard onto the countertop and turns to unload several large boxes from his dolly. He stacks them easily next to the receptionist's desk, and Sarah flits around to check the address labels in order to alert the assistants in the back. I content myself with watching the clear ripples of his back muscles as he works.

“So, you gonna do the honors, NYU?” He holds out the clipboard, which I stare at for a moment until Karen snatches it away.

“I’ll take care of that today,” she purrs, shooting me a dirty look after she returns the board. “But Layla, this will be your job most evenings, got it? Sorry, Nico. You know we gotta teach these young kids everything these days. You workin’ the door at AJ’s this weekend?”

“Every Saturday,” Nico concurs. He sets the clipboard back on the remaining packages he has to deliver and wheels everything back to the elevators. “Girl, you know I gotta pay the bills.”

“You know I do,” Karen cheers. “See you tomorrow, then, Nico.”

She taps her fingernails on the wooden desktop cheerfully before teetering back to her office in her noisy boots. They look like Louboutins. She must either buy them at sample sales or be in an amazing amount of debt; there’s no way an office manager makes enough money for shoes like that, no matter how profitable the firm is. Sarah stands up promptly to deliver the smaller packages to the assistants, leaving me alone with Mr. Panty-melting smile.

“Your first day going all right, NYU?”

The deep voice yanks me out of my ungracious thoughts, and I jerk back to where Nico stands, waiting for the elevator to arrive. God, that voice is going to be the end of me—I can already tell. Damn, and there's that ass again, filling out his company-issued cargo pants in a way that no man has any right to do. It's hard not to love a man in uniform, even if it's just from FedEx.

“Um, yes,” I say, willing my voice to even out and sound less like a flustered thirteen-year-old talking to a boy for the first time. Goddammit, I'm not that flustered girl anymore—I haven't been since the day I stepped onto Manhattan a year and a half ago.

“Where you from, NYU? Kansas?”

I snort, which is oddly the first sound since he walked in the door that sounds like me. There I am—direct, even caustic sometimes, never afraid to express what I'm thinking. Purveyor of distinctly unladylike sounds, according to my mother.

“Are you serious?” I ask. “Kansas? Why would you say that?”

Nic grins, and I'm pleased to say that this time I can still feel my toes. Good, I've already established a solid learning curve with this one.

“Just 'cause you got that Dorothy look all about you, NYU. Bright lights, big city and all that. So, Kansas? Am I right? Or is it Iowa?”

“Um, *neither*,” I pronounce emphatically. “Definitely not. Washington, actually.” And then, realizing that to a New York

who probably hasn't spent much time outside the tristate area, Washington State isn't any different than the Midwest, I add, "Just outside of Seattle."

"Ah," he says, as if that tells him everything about me. The way he's examining me, I can't help but wonder if it does. When he looks down at what I assume is a list of deliveries on his clipboard, I glance down at my outfit, wondering what about me says "Not a New Yorker" so clearly. It's not that bad. The clothes are cheap, but I bought them here only last year, and the skirt is black. Between that and my hair, which is rioting in a big ponytail of curls right now, I don't exactly look like a character from *Leave It to Beaver*.

The elevator bell signals the opening doors, and Nico backs into the car before I can think of anything else to say.

"See you tomorrow, NYU," he says, raising a hand in mock farewell.

"It's Layla!" I call out as the doors begin to shut, but not before I catch a sly wink and one more flash of that big, bright smile. I sit back in my chair with a thud, wondering what the hell had just happened to me. Sarah's shoes echo on the hardwood floors as she returns from her package delivery.

"Everything okay?" she asks, taking her seat in the chair next to me. This desk really isn't big enough for two people, and I'm happy that I won't have to sit permanently so close that she can see every emotion as it affects my body.

I smile, pleased when the phone rings so I don't have to reply. Because the honest answer is no. I'm not okay. I've never been farther from okay in my life.

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To Be Continued...Fall 2016

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