

WESTON PARKER

MIY
LAST
Song

A LAST TIME NOVEL

MY LAST SONG

WESTON PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

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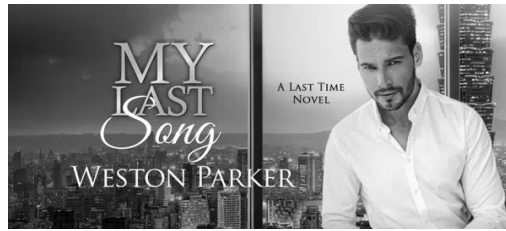
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FIND WESTON PARKER



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DESCRIPTION



I left my high school boyfriend without a word, but I had a secret.

My parents forced me to leave town when they found out I was pregnant.

He still haunts my dreams all these years later.

His dark hair and forest green eyes have my heart racing. I can't imagine how hot he is now.

They say you never forget your first love, and they're right.

But that's the past. And I should leave it there.

Thankfully I'm too busy to think about him or much of anything else.

As a talent agent for the biggest firms in New York, my life as a small-town girl from Texas is in the rearview mirror.

Then I'm asked to recruit the hottest songwriter on the scene.

There's a big promotion for me if I can get him to sign with us. As a single mom, that's music to my ears.

It's all good until my boss gives me the guy's name—and it's my high school boyfriend.

As hot as ever, he gives me one look, and I'm back to being liable to take my clothes off if he doesn't do it for me.

But there's one thing I can never let him see.

The secret I ran away with is twelve now, and my lost lover has no idea.

This might be my last song.

Introduction



Hey! We're missing you over here at the Parker's Insider Group.

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot with the best book part in town and let's connect.

Also you get a FREE novel when you join, cause, why not?

See you on the inside...

[Get it HERE](#)

Twelve Years Ago

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!
My arm shot out and crashed into my alarm clock, sending it flying before it landed with a heavy thud on the floor. I groaned, rolling over and prying my eyes open to glare at the device that'd just ripped me out of a really hot dream.

I desperately tried to cling to the remnants of the dream, wishing that the images my brain had conjured up of Rainey moving on top of me had been real, but they weren't. As I blinked against the early morning sunlight streaming in through my dusty, slightly tattered curtains, reality sank in.

Rainey wasn't here, but judging by the sounds of movement coming from our kitchen, my father was. I sighed, rolling onto my back but staying in my bed, staring at the brown water stains on the ceiling while I listened to the telltale noises that told me he was already drinking.

The freezer opened and closed with a squeak of the hinges. An ice cube clattered as it dropped into his glass. Liquid sloshed into it next. Then there was the faint shuffle of his feet past my door as he made his way back to the TV.

Now that I was becoming more aware, I could also hear the familiar soundtrack of an adult film he loved playing in the background. My eyes slammed shut and I shook my head, the morning glory I'd woken up with instantly going down.

Welcome back to reality, Jesse.

I tried to block it out, to mentally transport myself to that peaceful place I only ever managed to find when I was with Rainey, but it was no use. The moaning had started on the TV and red-hot rage suddenly raced through me. I knew that I wouldn't have been here if it hadn't been for that man's sperm, but he wasn't worthy of the title *father*.

On the other hand, at least he'd stuck around—unlike my good-for-nothing mother. She was gone and she had been for a long time. She'd left me with the alcoholic sperm donor who never did anything that wasn't for himself. He gave me a roof over my head but even that, he made me pay for. If not with money, then with the shitty way he treated me.

My alarm blared again, giving me the warning that my snooze time was up. If there was any way I was going to make it to school before the tardy bell, I had to get going. I'd gotten into enough trouble for being late, and while I didn't give a damn, I didn't want the administration calling my dad in again.

There was always hell to pay whenever they did. Dear old dad didn't want to be bothered by my school. If it'd been up to him, I wouldn't even have been attending anymore. He considered formal education useless, but I'd dug my heels in on that point.

If I had any hope of winding up someplace else, someplace far, far away from him and his way of life, then I had to finish high school. As much as I hated it, I forced myself out of bed and rubbed my hands over my hair as I headed to my closet.

My clothing options were limited at the best of times, but since I hadn't done laundry in a few days, there was almost nothing left in there. Cursing myself for forgetting about laundry when I was down to my last clean pair of underwear, I grabbed that and then spun around to swipe yesterday's jeans up off the floor.

Without inspecting them to see if it was obvious that this would be my fourth day wearing them, I chucked them over my shoulder and went to hunt down a shirt. There were a

couple of dirty ones hanging over the back of my broken desk chair, and after sniffing them, I chose the one that was the least rank.

“Jesse!” my father bellowed as soon as I opened my door. “Bring the whiskey. I’m almost empty.”

My teeth gnashed together, but I made a detour to the kitchen instead of going straight to the bathroom. It was only a few steps from my bedroom door to the kitchen counter, and once I got there, my nose scrunched up at the sight of the place.

Dad was even more allergic to cleaning up than I was, and since neither of us had done dishes in a few days, the stench of the full sink was becoming almost unbearable. He’d also obviously made himself a late-night snack after I’d gone to bed, and now there were bits of ramen noodles on the stove, the floor, and the counter.

When he was drunk, the debris he left behind after eating was similar to what I imagined it’d look like when a toddler tried to make and eat its own meal. I shook my head, wrapping my fingers around the long, plastic neck of the whiskey bottle. I considered pouring the liquid down the drain rather than letting him guzzle the rest of it.

I’d done it a few times when I’d been younger. *Lesson learned.*

Since I didn’t really feel like trying to explain another black eye today, I refrained from catapulting him into a hysterical fit of fury and grimaced as I carried the bottle the few feet to the TV room. Dad was sitting on his favorite, threadbare armchair, not concerned about the metal springs sticking into his ass and thighs.

With graying hair, sallow skin, and gaunt face, he looked nothing like he used to anymore. I’d seen pictures of him when he’d been younger, and he’d looked almost exactly like I did now. We weren’t oil paintings, but we weren’t ugly either. Looking at him now was like staring at myself in a little less than two decades if I couldn’t avoid following in his footsteps.

“What are you staring at?” he snapped, reaching for the bottle before he sneered at me. “You finally giving up on school?”

“No, why?”

He turned back to the TV, a lascivious look in his eyes as a woman bounced on top of a guy with a huge dick on the screen. Dad shrugged but looked back at me as he responded. “Thought you’d be on your way to school by now. Looks like you gave up. People like us don’t make it anyway. You’re a fucking idiot if you think you’re any different.”

“Maybe, but at least I’ll be able to say that I tried.” The words came grinding out of me. We’d had this argument before—a lot.

Dad glanced at me as he raised the bottle and sloshed some more whiskey into his glass. “Trying don’t mean shit when you don’t have anything going for you. You’re not smart. We don’t have family money or connections. You’re just another dumbass who’s going to knock up some girl and end up just like me.”

I shook my head, fierce determination filling my chest. “I will never end up like you.”

He snorted, then let out a bark of derisive laughter. “You really are an idiot if you think that’s true. I used to think the same thing, but then I learned that life’s a bitch. She saddled me with you, didn’t she? Wouldn’t have done that if she wasn’t a bitch.”

“You could’ve used a condom. Life didn’t saddle you with me. That was all you and your apparent aversion to prophylactics.”

“Using fancy words won’t change anything,” he retorted, his head shaking as he muttered under his breath. “Apparent aversion to prophylactics.”

I heard the sarcasm dripping from his tone, but I ignored it. Instead of engaging with him more, I turned to go to the bathroom and grabbed my shower. On my way back to my bedroom after, I heard him yell my name again.

“What?” I snapped without going to the TV room like he wanted me to. *Let him yell. Maybe he strains his voice and has to shut up for a few days.*

“Your beloved prophylactics don’t always work,” he called with more of that derisive laughter in his voice. “I used a condom, but here you are. And to think, all I really wanted that day was a blowjob.”

The words were slightly slurred, but I heard them loud and clear nonetheless. Not for the first time, either. One of his favorite pastimes was reminding me that he’d never wanted me to begin with and neither had my mother.

It still sucked to hear it, though. I’d just turned eighteen. What the hell was I supposed to do with the fact that they hadn’t meant to conceive me? I wasn’t supposed to be here. I kept thinking that maybe it’d make more sense when I got older, but I hadn’t had any luck on that front so far.

After getting my backpack from my room, I headed for the front door, glad that I was about to be out of the house and away from him for the rest of the day. He couldn’t let me go without one last shitty comment, though.

“You’re all high and mighty now, Jesse. You think you’re better than me, but you’re not. Fuck-ups like us inevitably only breed more fuck-ups. If you haven’t done it yet, you’re going to. That pretty little girlfriend of yours is gonna get knocked up and then you will be just like me. Mark my words.”

I didn’t bother replying. He loved the sound of his own voice and I’d already told him countless times that I’d off myself before I ended up like him. Gripping the strap of my backpack tighter, I slammed the door behind me and stalked all the way to school.

Rainey was waiting for me on the steps, and as soon as I saw her, everything ugly and tense inside me let up for a minute. *God, she’s so beautiful.*

Strawberry-blonde locks tumbled in soft curls to her waist, her bangs framing her gorgeous, heart-shaped face. The

headband she wore made it look like she had a crown of blue flowers in her hair, and the robin's egg color of them matched her eyes almost perfectly. Her curvy body was clad in another one of her whimsical, flowing sundresses, and I had the instant urge to drop to my knees in front of her, push up the hem of that dress, and tuck into the treasure between her legs.

I still didn't know what a girl like her saw in a guy like me. Where she was all soft and light, I was hard and dark. If she was sunshine, I was a thunderstorm. We were exact opposites in almost every way, and I knew her middle-class parents disapproved of her relationship with a guy from the wrong side of the tracks that, to their minds, would only drag her down with him.

As I thought it, my father's words echoed in my mind again. *That pretty little girlfriend of yours is gonna get knocked up, and then you'll be just like me.*

Disgust rolled through every inch of my being. I would never do that to her. She was the only good thing in my life, but as I looked at her, I wondered how long we were going to pretend that this thing between us was real.

There was no future for Rainey Hollenbeck and me. Sooner or later, she was going to realize that she was way too good for me. When that happened, she was going to dump me like yesterday's trash.

That day wasn't today, though. When she saw me walking toward her, a radiant smile lit her entire face and she stood, waiting until I reached her before she flung her arms around my shoulders and melted into me.

"Jesse," she breathed into my ear, able to reach it easily since she was still two steps above the one I was on. "I missed you."

"Yeah, you too." I hugged her back, but my spine remained rigid as I inhaled her sweet, buttery scent and glared at anyone who dared to pay too much attention to this public display of affection.

Before Rainey, I'd hardly even spoken to anyone at school. She'd broken through my defenses, but none of the rest of them had, and I still didn't like being stared at.

She pulled back, smiling as she looked up into my eyes and moved both of her hands to my chest, one of her palms directly over my heart. "Hey you. How are you holding up after the other night? I haven't really heard much from you. I was worried."

I forced my lips into something resembling a smile, trying my very fucking best to banish my father's opinions from my mind. I didn't talk about him with anyone, and I wasn't about to share his crappy thoughts with her now. It'd only worry her more.

Besides, since she'd brought up the *other night* and was looking at me the way she was, I guessed she needed some reassurance now. I wasn't a nice guy, but for her, I tried. Especially since the night she was referring to was a night we'd slept together. I'd taken her virginity a couple of months ago, and we'd done it a few times since, but she was always vulnerable and a little needy after.

Sliding my hands down her sides, I let my fingers rest on her hips and squeezed. Then I brought my forehead down to hers. "You have nothing to worry about, baby. I texted you, didn't I? I loved the other night. How are you doing with it?"

She shrugged, the corners of her mouth tilting up into a coy smile. "I loved it, too. So much that I think we should do it again sometime. Soon."

That pretty little girlfriend of yours is gonna get knocked up, and then you'll be just like me. The words slammed into my brain again, I tensed up as I shook my head. "Maybe we should cool it for a while."

A shallow crease appeared between her eyebrows and hurt flashed in the blue depths of those eyes. I hated it, but it was what it was. "Don't you...want me?"

"Of course I do, but we need to be careful."

“We have been.” Her head dropped to the side as she gave me a long look and pushed her fingers into my hair, toying with the strands as she kept her eyes on mine. “What’s going on with you today? You look stressed.”

“It’s nothing.” The first bell rang, and I breathed out a sigh of relief. “We’ve got to go.”

“We do, but are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.” I forced another smile and dipped my head to speak against her lips. “With everything I’ve got going on in my life, I’m glad you’re in it. We’ll talk later, okay?”

“Okay,” she agreed reluctantly, taking my hand when I offered it to her and letting me walk her to her homeroom.

As I watched her join her peers and link her arm with her best friend’s, I sighed, an ominous feeling making itself known in my chest. My relationship with her really was the best thing I’d ever had, and I appreciated her more than she could know, but it wouldn’t be long now before she left me.

I didn’t know how I knew it, but I did. Rainey Hollenbeck was close to moving on. The best I could hope for was a chance to give her a proper goodbye before she did.

Something was going on with my Jesse. I didn't know what it was and I knew he'd never tell me, but the boy I loved wasn't as mysterious to me as he once had been. I could read him like an open book these days, and something was bugging him.

It was almost like he was bracing himself for something bad to happen. As far as I knew, everything between us was great, but I didn't know much about the other aspects of his life. He never took me to his house and he never spoke to me about his parents.

Since he kept referring to everything else he had going on, I had a feeling that was where the problem lay instead of it being with us, but I couldn't help suspecting that he was letting whatever it was come between us. As I waited for him behind the bleachers after school, I prepared myself for the conversation we had to have. There were things I needed to tell him, but we hadn't had time this morning and I'd wanted to check in with him first anyway.

As he walked out of the building and came toward our regular meeting spot, it was like I felt him emerge from the school even if I hadn't seen him just yet. Turning slowly, my heart skipped a beat when I finally laid eyes on him again after a few long hours of being apart.

Tall, dark, and handsome, Jesse Slone had always had an almost visceral effect on me. I'd had a crush on him for much longer than the few months we'd been together. Even his name

was so damn sexy that my insides had clenched the first time I'd heard it.

With a mess of jet-black hair and a permanent five o'clock shadow on his jaw, dark, forest green eyes, and a lean, hard frame, he was more man than boy. He was also the guilty pleasure fantasy most girls in school drooled over, but I didn't think he knew about it.

Jesse Slone was our resident mysterious, brooding, bad boy lookalike that made everyone think he was bad to the bone, but he wasn't. If there was one thing I'd learned in the time we'd been together, it was that deep down inside, he had a heart of gold.

He just didn't like people knowing about it. On his best days, he'd grunt a polite greeting to my friends before he swept me away from them but most of the time, he barely even nodded at anyone else. He was standoffish and borderline rude, but as soon as we were alone together, he was charming and sweet.

Although I hadn't told him yet, I loved him so much that it hurt sometimes that he wouldn't open up to me more. He said he'd opened up to me more than he ever had with anyone else, and I believed it, but I wished he'd trust me with what was always plaguing his mind.

As much as he tried to shut it off when we were together, it was still always there, a darkness lurking behind those eyes like a beast in a forest, just waiting for its chance to rip something apart. The *something* in this case being Jesse's own soul.

When his gaze landed on mine from halfway across the football field, a part of me soared while another crashed to the ground. Nothing had changed about his confident gait and there was a small, private grin reserved just for me on his lips, but his expression was more closed off than it had been this morning and he still seemed distant—and not just physically.

As he approached me, our gazes held and everything in me ached to be in his arms. Soon enough, I was. There was no hesitation in him when he got to me and pulled me closer,

crushing me against his chest like he was afraid I'd disappear if he didn't hold me tight enough.

I wasn't going anywhere, though. I just had to find a way to make him see that. Kissing the top of my head, he held me for another beat before he cupped my face in his hands and slid his finger under my chin to let me know he wanted me to look up at him.

I looped my arms around his neck, powerless to the draw of him as I smiled when I met his eyes. "How was your day?"

"All better now." He wrapped his arms around my waist and rested his forehead against mine, an affectionate gesture that he seemed to love. A spark ignited behind his eyes as he stared into mine, and something that'd been tense inside me all day relaxed at the sight of it. "How was yours?"

I considered the question, then let out a happy sigh. "Also better now. Karen Smith keeps asking me if we're coming to her party on Saturday. We're going, right?"

The spark fizzed out and he lifted his head away from mine as he shook it. "I can't, but we can meet up after. I'll come to your place and we can leave from there? Just let me know when you're home?"

"Okay," I agreed after pausing for a beat. "I'll leave my window open for you, but are you sure you can't go? It'll be fun."

"Not for me," he said quickly, but then took a breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the defiance I'd seen a flash of just a second ago was gone, but he was resolute in his decision. I saw it clear as day. As he squeezed my hips again, he smiled and pressed a kiss to my forehead. "Go have fun with Karen and the others, and I'll just see you after."

"Yeah. Okay." While I wished he'd open himself up to friends and social activities more often, I'd never try to change him. "I'll miss you at the party, though."

"No, you won't." He kept smiling as he said it, but his eyes didn't smile with his mouth. "You'll be fine without me. What

do you want to do this afternoon? We could take a walk to the river and do our homework under our tree if you want.”

“I do want to, but I can’t today. My mom texted me to come home right after school. I have an algebra test on Friday, so she’s probably going to be watching me like a hawk for the rest of the week.”

Understanding softened his gaze, but there was still something hard in it nonetheless. “My offer to help you with algebra stands. I didn’t do too badly at it.”

A year older than I was, Jesse often offered to help me with the work he’d done the year before. I took him up on it as often as I needed to, but my mother had started throwing a monkey wrench into the works. As soon as she’d figured out who I’d been spending so much time with after school, she began thinking up reasons for me to be home instead.

With college applications and everything, I got where she was coming from, but Jesse was smart. He really had helped me a lot, but she despised him. She’d told me many times that lowlife boys like him had been put on the planet to tempt young women and destroy their lives. I wholeheartedly disagreed with her. She didn’t even know him, but that didn’t matter. She’d made up her mind and she refused to budge.

“Thanks,” I said, looking up at him again and wishing that my mom could see him for who he really was. “I might have to take you up on your offer again later this week, but I’d better get home now before she comes looking for me.”

“I’ll walk you to the parking lot,” he replied as he took my hand, snaking his fingers around my own and holding them tight. “Text me when you’re done studying. Maybe we can get together later.”

“Maybe, but I might not be able to get away from her today.”

A knowing gleam crept into his eyes, and it was laced with so much pain that I averted my gaze from his as we walked, staring off into the middle distance instead. Jesse didn’t call

me out on it. He knew how my parents felt about him, and he didn't seem to blame them for it.

After he kissed me goodbye, he stayed in the parking lot, watching me with a stoic expression on his face as I drove away. My fingers tightened on the steering wheel. If I wanted our relationship to work, and I did, I needed to find a way to get my mother to realize that he was good—and good for me. Because he was.

Before I'd gotten him to notice me, I'd been a lonely girl in a sea of people. With as many friends as I had, it seemed impossible to feel alone, but yet, that was exactly how I'd felt. Alienated. Misunderstood. Like something was missing.

Then Jesse had smiled at me after years of not even knowing I existed, and everything had changed. It had felt like I'd found that missing part of myself, and while I knew we were only teenagers, I believed with everything I had that he was it for me.

All the way home, I tried to come up with ways to convince my parents to give him a chance, but as I walked in, I realized that things were far worse than I'd thought. My mother was waiting for me in the living room, her arms folded and with a disapproving, impatient expression pinching her features.

"You're late," she snapped as soon as the door closed behind me. "We need to talk."

"About what?" I asked, dropping my backpack in the foyer as I turned to face off with her. Crossing my own arms, I met her narrowed gaze with a sense of trepidation taking hold of me. As I looked at her, I noticed the box in her hand that was partially obscured by her arm, and my stomach sank. "What is that?"

"You know exactly what it is." She released her arms to hold the pregnancy test out to me. "We're going to the bathroom right now and you're going to take it."

"Excuse me?"

“Stop playing dumb,” she hissed, thrusting the test toward me again. “I’ve heard you being sick every morning for the last week. Your father and I have both heard you at night, too. You can’t tell me you haven’t suspected anything. I mean, look at you. Your chest is bigger, you’ve stopped eating, and you’ve been exhausted. Surely, you know that all of those things are signs of early pregnancy.”

Another wave of nausea rolled through me. Of course I knew what those things were signs of. It was what I’d been meaning to talk to Jesse about. I wanted to ask him if any of the condoms we’d used had broken or malfunctioned in any way, but I hadn’t gotten around to it just yet. Partially because I hadn’t wanted to freak either of us out.

And now...

I tightened my grip on my chest. “I’m not taking it.”

“Yes, you are, young lady,” she insisted. “Right now.”

We argued about it for almost an hour, but eventually, she took me by my wrist and dragged me to the guest toilet downstairs. I sighed, but when she didn’t close the door or leave the bathroom, I gave her a pointed look.

“If you’re going to make me do this, could I at least have some privacy?”

She shook her head firmly. “We’ve given you privacy, and look at what that brought us. Just take the test.”

I desperately didn’t want to, but I didn’t have a choice. After taking the innocent-looking white stick with the small screen from her, I did what I needed to do and replaced the cap after, before washing my hands as my heart fluttered in my chest.

It took less than a minute before the result appeared on the screen, a single word that changed everything in a heartbeat.
Pregnant.

My mother practically roared when she caught a glimpse of it, immediately snatching the test out of my hand and shaking it like that would change the result. She was furious, ranting and raving at me while I stood there, not hearing a

word she was saying. It was like the world had stood still and I was in a bubble of my own, unable to process anything except what I'd just learned.

I'm pregnant. With Jesse's child. It took a few minutes, but the more I repeated those words to myself, the more I felt the opposite of what my mother so clearly did. Instead of being upset, I was excited.

This hadn't been part of my plan, but Jesse and I were going to have a baby. A beautiful little bundle of love that would hopefully look just like him. Maybe I was naïve. This was definitely going to be harder than I could imagine, but a *baby*. With Jesse.

I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him anyway. I belonged with him. Having kids with him was a dream come true for me, even if it was much earlier than I'd expected.

"Rainey Anne Hollenbeck!" my mom hollered when she realized I wasn't listening to her. The shrill sound of her voice in the tiny bathroom snapped me out of my thoughts, and when I glanced at her, there were tears streaming steadily down her pale cheeks and a flat, haunted look in her eyes. "You will not see that boy again. Not ever."

"What?" I blinked, so confused that I suddenly felt sick again. "Of course I am. We go to the same school and it's his baby. We're going to raise it toget—"

"I'm not going to have that good for nothing loser hanging around with a child in the middle of it. If you think we're going to let you play house with that Jesse boy, you've never been more wrong. This is serious, Rainey. It's not some little fantasy that ends in a happily ever after. Go to your room. I'm going to handle this."

"Handle it? How?" My voice sounded strangely distant, even to my own ears. I had no idea what she was going to do as she stormed out, still clutching the test in her hand, but I'd never have guessed how serious she'd been when she'd said I'd never see him again.

Handle it, she did. Just not like I'd ever have thought she would.

Rainey didn't text me that afternoon. She hadn't shown up at school for the rest of the week, either. Her phone had been turned off for days and she hadn't logged into any of her social media accounts or checked her messages there.

Worried sick and left without any other choice, I was forced to speak to some of her friends on Friday. Karen Smith blinked at me when she heard me calling her name in the hall. "Are you talking to me?"

I nodded, coming to a stop right in front of the petite brunette. "Have you seen Rainey at all since Tuesday?"

She blinked some more, clearly stunned that I was speaking to her. When I cleared my throat and gave her a pointed look, she started and shook her head, swallowing heavily as she shook it again. "No, I haven't seen her, actually. Ms. Sunny said she'd called in sick when I asked about her in homeroom yesterday."

"Have you spoken to her at all?"

"Ms. Sunny?" Karen frowned. "Sure, I just told you I—"

My teeth ground together. "No, not Ms. Sunny. Rainey. Have you spoken to Rainey since Tuesday?"

"No, I haven't." Her frown deepened. "Have you?"

"Nope. That's why I'm asking." I stared at the girl, wondering if she was covering for her friend. They weren't that close, but she was the first one of Rainey's legion of groupies I'd spotted. My girl was more popular than she

realized, and although I wished sometimes that she was mine alone, I couldn't blame them for gravitating to her.

Karen balked when she looked back at me and her hands shot up with her palms facing me. "Don't look at me like you're about to kill me. I don't know where she is. I swear. Ms. Sunny said she was sick, though. I promise. She said her mom called and—"

"Her mom called?"

She nodded, her eyes wide. "Maybe she's got laryngitis or something and she doesn't have a voice. I don't know." Karen tossed her dark hair over her shoulder and sniffed. "If you're so worried about her, why don't you just go to her house?"

Because her father might shoot me on sight. I pulled back my shoulders and straightened to my full height, seeing the flicker of fear in her eyes as I towered over her. "I will. Just thought I'd speak to her friends first. Thanks, Karen."

Dismissing her as I turned on my heels, I marched to where I'd parked my beat-up motorcycle in the parking lot. The thing was old as hell, but she ran like a dream now that I'd fixed her up. I didn't bring her in every day, preferring to walk when I was too pissed off at my dad to be safe on Martha's back, but thankfully, I'd come to school on her today.

Firing up her engine, I revved it a few times and raced out of there in a cloud of gravel and dust. Panic and worry ate at me, urging me on regardless of the fact that Rainey's parents weren't going to be thrilled to see me.

But fuck them. My jaw hardened. She was my girl and I cared about her more than I should've. Nothing was going to keep me away from her if she was sick and needed me. Not even her snobbish folks.

As I pulled up outside their neat double-story home on the good side of our small town, a sense of dread crashed into me with a vengeance. Something about the place seemed off, but I didn't know what it was yet.

Shutting off the bike, I undid the clasp on the helmet and stared at the house as I climbed off Martha's back. Their

hedges and front lawn had always been immaculate, but the first thing that jumped out at me was the fact that it looked like none of it had been trimmed in a few days. Not long enough to seem abandoned, but definitely just a tiny bit wilder than I'd ever seen it before.

There were no cars in their driveway, but her parents were probably still at work and Rainey's would be in the garage. Pushing away from the bike, I ran my hands through my hair in an effort to tame it some and make it look slightly more presentable, but as I walked up to their front door, I noticed another thing that must've triggered more subconscious thoughts that something was wrong.

All their windows were closed and their drapes were closed. I frowned. Rainey's dad had a thing about fresh air. She'd told me once that he felt stifled and sick when the windows and doors weren't open. Something about growing up with his paranoid grandmother in a house that was always locked up tighter than Fort Knox.

I didn't know the whole story, but I did know that it was also springtime in Texas. No one had all the windows closed.

My heartrate spiked, anxiety building in my gut. When I reached the front porch and my boot kicked up a swirl of dust, my stomach knotted. My house was always at least a little bit dusty, but Rainey's mom ran a tight ship. I'd never seen so much as a speck of dirt on their welcome mat.

As my fingers rolled into a fist and tapped at the door, I knew instinctively that no one was going to answer it. They weren't here. I knocked anyway. Then I waited a few seconds and knocked again, but I wasn't surprised when no voices came from the inside.

Knowing I would be in deep shit if I went in without being asked to and someone caught me in there, I tried the door anyway. The handle gave easily under my hand, and the knots in my stomach wound tighter than ever.

No way they'd left this place unlocked, but they must have. Either that, or someone else had left it that way. Something was definitely very wrong here.

Pushing the door open slowly, I glanced over my shoulder to make sure no one was watching me. Then I stepped inside and closed it behind me. The air was still and stale in here, but since the house was also practically empty, that didn't surprise me.

What did surprise me was the fact that the place was practically empty. My eyebrows mashed together and bile rose in the back of my throat. They were gone.

She was gone.

All that was left were a few pieces of furniture and the drapes in the windows. Almost like they'd left it behind to make the house look like a home while they sold it—and the drapes in the windows to keep people from being able to see in and realize it was unoccupied.

Everything in me rebelled at the thought that they'd moved and she hadn't even told me, but I was staring at the evidence with my own two eyes. Even so, I refused to accept it. "Hello? Is anybody home? Rainey? Baby? Are you here?"

As I called out, my feet carried me to the stairs of their own accord and took them up two at a time, racing down the hall to her bedroom. It was empty too, aside from her bed. That was still there, but it was only the frame and the mattress. No bedding.

It was in that moment that I realized she had left. Left town. Left her home. Left her school. Her home. Her friends. Left *me*. All without saying goodbye or even telling me there was a possibility of them moving.

As the realization sank in, it felt like my chest was being cracked open by a crowbar. I'd never told her how I felt about her, and I'd always known she was going to break up with me, but this was beyond anything I could ever have imagined.

It *hurt* more than anything I could ever have imagined too.

I sank to my haunches as pain radiated through every inch of my being. I didn't cry, but my eyes stung and it felt like I couldn't breathe. My lungs had been surrounded by quick-drying concrete or something and they wouldn't expand.

On the verge of hyperventilating, I lay down flat on my back on the hardwood floor and stayed there for a long, long time. So confused that I couldn't think straight, I didn't even try. I just lay there and tried to wrap my head around the fact that they were gone.

That *she* was gone.

Hours later, I finally walked back into my own house, but I didn't even remember getting home. I'd barely closed the door behind me when my father yelled my name. "Jesse! Get in here."

Since he was already slurring, even my muddled brain managed to come to the conclusion that he was wasted. Knowing there was no point in arguing, I went to the TV room, ignoring the adult film on the screen as I glared at him.

"What do you want?"

His eyes were unfocused when they swung to mine. "Go get me some more beers. We're out."

Without arguing, I held out my hand. "Fine. Give me the money."

"Find it your fucking self. I'm not a cash machine," he snarled, then turned back to his movie and waved me away.

With my mind still all over the place and my lungs still broken, I rummaged around the kitchen for some money, and when I had enough for a six pack, I left the house again. As I climbed astride Martha, I decided I wasn't going home tonight.

I'd bring him his beer, but I wasn't staying there while he was drunk and in the mood to boss me around. Instead, I went to the store around the corner that had been selling me alcohol for my dad since I was thirteen, and after dropping it off at our house and grabbing my backpack, I went back to Rainey's.

Just in case.

Maybe they hadn't moved. Maybe they were just redecorating. Maybe... I didn't know, but I needed to see her.

To talk to her. To wake up from the nightmare that was my entire damn life if she was gone.

When I got back to their place to wait for her, I let myself in again and went up to her room, lying down on her stripped mattress and staring up at the same ceiling she'd been looking at every night since way before we'd met.

A thousand memories of our few months together played through my head as I lay there, wondering if she'd ever been in this exact same spot, thinking of me with as much longing as I was feeling for her right now. I wasn't the type to get involved, much less the type to get attached. I'd done both those things with her simply because I hadn't been able *not* to.

When I realized sleep wasn't going to happen for me very soon, I rolled off the bed and got my notebook out of my backpack. Then I lay down on my stomach on the bare mattress and stayed up all night writing about her. Writing was the one thing that brought me solace outside of her. I'd been doing it since I could remember, just writing down whatever words popped into my head.

If I didn't get them out, they'd only get louder and louder until eventually, I had no choice. I had to write them down on whatever was closest. Napkins, walls, the dirt. It didn't matter where I wrote them, as long as I got them out. It was only then that my mind would quiet once more.

At first, I'd thought it was poetry, but then I realized the words weren't poems. They were songs. No one knew this about me. Not even Rainey. No one knew I played both the piano and the guitar or that I'd taught myself to play both instruments alone in the music room at school. Rainey knew I scribbled in my notebook a lot, but she didn't know what I was writing.

I'd been meaning to play her one of the songs I'd written about her. It was how I'd been planning on letting her know that I loved her, but as rage and fury crawled out of me and onto the page that tore under the force of my pen, I was so unbelievably happy that I'd never done it.

I would've made a fool of myself if I had. Clearly, she'd never cared about me. She couldn't have, or else she wouldn't have disappeared without so much as a damn note to say goodbye.

As I lay there on her bed, my heart breaking until it was nothing more than a pile of dust that got blown away by the storm raging inside me, I knew I would never let anyone close to me again. People were cruel. They sucked.

They *left*.

Everyone left. Even my own mother hadn't been able to stick with me. My dad was right. I was useless. A piece of shit who might as well give up. I had nothing going for me. No one who cared about me. All I had was myself, and right now, that wasn't worth very much.

But it would be.

Present Day

“Gravity Talent Management. This is Rainey Hollenbeck’s office. What can I do for you today?”

I smiled as I listened to my assistant, Rita, answer her phone. She was so young and chirpy. Life hadn’t jaded her yet, and I loved her for it.

The door between my office and hers was almost always open, and as she glanced at me from where she was sitting behind her desk to where I was behind mine, I shook my head. I wasn’t available to take any calls right now. My boss was due in my office at any moment, and I wouldn’t be able to pay proper attention to anything else until I knew what he needed to talk to me about.

Rita nodded her understanding at me, then relayed the message to whoever was on the phone. “I’m afraid she’s not available right now. Can I take a message?”

She listened for a minute, repeating what the person had said out loud for me to hear. “Mr. David Rayne on behalf of Jake Holt would like to set up an appointment for his boss with Rainey to talk about his next album. Got it.”

I cringed. Jake Holt was one of the biggest artists on the scene at the moment and I owed him a call, but I knew what he wanted to talk to me about and he was being a big baby. He would’ve had me wipe his butt for him if he could, but I was his agent, not his babysitter. Although, often, those two things were very much synonymous.

Rita spoke to David for a few more minutes, and once she'd hung up, she turned to me. "He's still got the old writer's block?"

I nodded. "Somehow, he thinks I have to cure him. I've been trying, but nothing I've done has helped him at all. I'm starting to wonder if he ever wrote his own songs to begin with. It sure doesn't feel that way."

She pouted. "I loved his music until I came to work for you. On the other hand, I loved a lot of the talent you work with until I came to work for you. Are all superstars so high maintenance, or do they just send you all the super needy ones?"

I chuckled. "In my experience, the more famous they become, the needier they get. When I first started out, all my clients were such sweethearts. These days, there's not much that's sweet about them except the money they bring in."

"Well, at least they're bringing in the money. Especially your roster of clients. You're a superstar in your own right."

My cheeks flushed. "That's quite enough of that. Any more compliments, and you'll give me a head as big as theirs. It's nice of you to say, though."

"Rita," a commanding voice boomed from the doorway to her office. "Is she ready for me?"

A second later, my boss appeared in the adjoining door between our separate offices. He grinned at my assistant over his shoulder, then marched into my office without waiting for her to respond, and shut the door firmly behind him.

Max was a good boss, but he expected results. An elderly man who'd made a name for himself by collecting talent like they were stamps, he was intimidating as heck and he knew this business inside out. My heart jumped into my throat at the sight of him in my relatively small space.

I'd been at the agency for six years now and I'd climbed the ranks faster than I'd expected to, but he still didn't come down from the executive wing often. When he did, it meant something. I just didn't know what it meant today.

“Rainey.” He moved to the chair across from my desk and lowered himself into it without waiting for me to ask him to do it. “I need our next big talent. Have you got someone for me?”

My insides froze up. “I’ve got my eye on a few people. Why do we need someone new?”

He shrugged, a razor-sharp grin spreading on his lips. “Adam Jeffries has just signed the guy who got cast for the next superhero blockbuster. You know how much I hate it when Adam gets one we should’ve gotten.”

Some of the tension gripping me eased up. *His rivalry with Adam Jeffries. That’s all this is about.*

Internally letting out a sigh of relief, I leaned back in my chair and smiled. “I heard about that. You don’t usually come to me about this sort of thing, though. I thought something was wrong.”

He waved me off. “Nothing is wrong except that we should’ve signed that guy when his audition went well. He was a nobody back then. Why didn’t we know about him?”

“We *did* know about him,” I corrected gently. “As far as I know, Maddie went to see him after that audition. I’m not sure what happened after that.”

“Maddie jacked it up.” He let out a heavy exhale. “What’s going on with Jake Holt? His new album should be coming out soon.”

“It should be, but he’s stalling,” I said honestly. “He’s suffering from a bad case of writer’s block after his last supermodel boyfriend left him. I’ve been working with his whole team and his therapist, but they claim he needs more time.”

“Shit.” Max dragged a hand through his silver hair, eyeing me while he thought it over. “We need something big. *Someone* big. Everyone is talking about Adam landing the next superhero. I need something better than a superhero. If Jake’s blocked up, that means we can’t use him to steal back the thunder.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I do have a few people I’m looking into signing, but no one who’s been vetted properly yet. What are we looking for? Maybe I can put out some feelers.”

I’d made some connections in my time in New York City. After we’d moved here from Texas, I’d been a heartbroken, pregnant girl with no friends and without the love of her life. It’d taken me ages to recover even just a little bit, but once I had, I’d found that it was still easy enough to make friends.

Max had come to my office all of maybe three times in the six years I’d been at his agency. If he was here now, talking to me about this instead of some of his more seasoned agents, it meant that he was starting to trust me. Something I’d done had made him notice me.

This was my shot to get into his inner circle, and if I could do that, it would mean big things for my career. Max’s inner circle was the stuff industry legends were made of. They were the people he went to first when he got a lead on the next big thing. The people he turned to when problems needed solving. Most of all, they were the people who got the glory and the bonuses. The people who went on the retreats and the people who would never have to worry about their jobs.

That was where I wanted to be. I needed the bonuses, the perks that came with being in a higher position, and the job security. It would mean I could start saving for Jenna to go to college, for a house in the suburbs, and I would have more flexible hours and more days off to spend with her. It would be a dream come true.

As I daydreamed about this being my shot at the big time, Max mulled over the question I’d asked him, and when he spoke again, I knew I needed to come up with something good. “What we’re looking for is a new backbone. We either need a big name with a fresh story behind them, or we need someone to strengthen the clients we already have.”

“Strengthen?” I asked, but even as I said the word, an idea I’d been playing with for Jake for a while popped into my head. “How about a songwriter? If we get a good one, we’ll

always have songs ready for any of our existing or new talent whenever they need it.”

Max’s eyes narrowed, but then he flashed me the biggest grin I’d ever seen from him and snapped his fingers. “That’s why I came to you. I needed someone who was going to give me a new idea instead of something I’d heard a million times before. We’ve got songwriters on our roster, but not as many as we could have. It’s been a long time since anyone has looked into shaking up that part of our client base. God knows why they haven’t thought about it.”

I knew why. It was because signing a songwriter, even a great one, who wasn’t also a singer or some other kind of talent, wasn’t flashy enough. If we signed too many people who worked behind the scenes, we stayed behind the scenes ourselves.

“Excellent. Do you want me to look into it?”

He shook his head as he stood up. “No, I’ll have someone look into the songwriters who are on the scene at the moment. You focus on Jake Holt and his block in the meantime. If we find someone who looks like they’re the caliber we’re looking for, I’ll pass the name along to you. There’s no need for you to do the grunt work anymore.”

My brows shot up, but I smiled back at him and rose to my feet to shake his hand. “I’m always happy to help, sir.”

“I’m starting to realize that,” he said, shaking my hand before he left my office.

Once he was gone, I was so stunned that it felt like my head had been detached from my body and was now floating in the clouds. *There’s no need for me to do the grunt work anymore.*

I wasn’t on my way to the top floor of the building where all his inner circle members had their offices just yet, but I had a foot in the door and that was more than I’d dreamed of in a long time. For the rest of the day, I doubled down on work. From now on, I was going to make sure that I was above reproach in every possible way. If or when he took a closer

look at me, Max would see how meticulous and hardworking I really was, and then I might just break through the invisible barrier between myself and the top floor.

When I got home later, I checked my work at the door. I always tried not to bring it home with me, and regardless of how excited I was, I couldn't let my job steal my focus away from my daughter for the few hours we had together on normal weekdays.

"Honey, I'm home," I called in a singsong voice, setting my purse and keys down on the table in our small entrance hall before kicking off my shoes.

"We're in here, baby," my mom replied from the kitchen. "Jen and I are trying our hand at a fancy Chinese dish for dinner."

I inhaled deeply, smiling when I recognized the distinct scents of ginger and garlic in the air. Following my nose and my mother's voice, I rounded the corner into our galley-style kitchen and found her and Jenna behind the stove, prodding at some ingredients sizzling in a pan and juggling noodles in the strainer.

"It smells delicious in here," I said, walking up to Jenna first and wrapping my arms around her from behind. She giggled and wriggled in my arms, her little elbows flailing in my grip as she tried to pry herself out of my grasp.

"Mom," she groaned. "We're cooking here."

"I know, I know." I nuzzled her neck, smacking a kiss on her cheek before letting go of her and turning to smile at my mom. "Thanks for picking her up from school and staying with her."

"That's what grandmothers are for." My mother inclined her head toward the sink. "Now wash your hands and get on the line with us, cook. We've got a meal going and we're not here to chit-chat."

Laughing, I snapped my fingers to my forehead in a salute. Then I spun around and did as she'd said. My mother had been

a lifesaver these last twelve years. If it hadn't been for her and my dad, I honestly didn't know what I'd have done.

Of course, it had taken me a long time to get to a point where I could acknowledge that. For years after they'd ripped me out of my life literally overnight, I'd resented them. As a pregnant teenager, however, I hadn't had much say in anything. They'd taken away my phone, blocked my social media, and moved me out of my hometown in the dead of night.

It had only been once we were on our way to New York that I'd learned my dad had gotten a job offer here just before we'd found out about my pregnancy. My parents hadn't told me about it and they hadn't known if he'd be taking it, but then those two lines popped up and the decision had been made.

After washing my hands, I shook my head at myself to clear my mind, then joined them at the stove. Jenna had Jesse's deep green eyes and his smile, and whenever she looked at me, part of me still felt like I was looking at him.

We joked around while we cooked, and since those old memories had popped up out of nowhere while I'd been washing my hands, regret rolled through me once more. It was hot and bitter, weighing on my shoulders like a passed-out elephant had been draped across them.

Jesse Slone hadn't deserved what I'd done to him, but on the other hand, my parents had been right. He'd only been a kid and we'd only been together for a few months. Jenna probably would've felt like a burden to him, whereas to me, she was everything.

"How was your day at school, honey?" I asked, sliding in beside her and placing my head on top of hers when she rested it on my shoulder.

She glanced up at me and smiled. "It was good. How was your day at work?"

"It was great, but I'm going to need more detail from you than just, *it was good*. Or would you prefer talking about it

when we go to bed later?”

“Let’s talk about it when you come lie down with me later. For now, we’ve got food to cook, or didn’t you hear Grandma when she said we weren’t here to chit-chat?” Jenna gave me a stern look, her eyes sparkling with unshed laughter.

Yep. She’s my everything. As much as I regretted the way things went down back then, they’d worked out for the best, and in the end, that was all that mattered.

With the smooth surface of the Willamette River in the distance, I sat with my guitar on my lap, sipping on a cup of coffee that cost more than the meals I'd survived on when I'd first arrived in Portland. I strummed absently, jotting down some lyrics in my notebook as I went.

The balcony of my converted studio apartment was small, but the view of the city and the water was magnificent. On day one, I'd dragged a sofa out here and officially declared it my working space. Come rain, shine, or snow, I was either working out here or, if the weather was just too bad, I went to the other side of my apartment where I had a view of the snow-capped mountains beyond my floor-to-ceiling windows.

Sometimes, all this still felt like a dream. I found myself opening my fridge and grabbing something out of it quickly, glancing over my shoulder like I was stealing and expecting the owner of the place to come home at any moment and call the cops on my ass.

Old habits die hard, I guess.

Those nights I'd spent on Rainey Hollenbeck's empty bed, waiting for her to come home while hoping no one would find me there were long gone, but they'd been a real turning point for me. At my lowest was where I'd found not only my strength, but also the true extent of my talent.

In fact, it was one of the songs I'd written in that bedroom that had been the catalyst to getting me to where I was now. As I stared out at the city I now called home, I wondered

where she was. I'd never heard from her again, and occasionally, like tonight as the sun set and I pounded out song after song, I still thought about her.

I wondered where she was, what she was doing, and whether she was happy. I wondered why she'd left, where she'd gone, and whether she'd known she would be going. I wasn't heartbroken anymore. But that might just have been because I didn't have a heart to be broken anymore.

Not that anyone would believe that to be true when they heard my songs, but it was true. I just did what I did and got it done.

My phone started buzzing from somewhere underneath the pile of notes on the table in front of me and I cursed, bending over to reach for it across the top of my guitar. When I finally managed to track it down, it stopped ringing only to start again right away.

I grimaced when I saw the name on the screen. Rosie James. The girl was a country sensation at the moment, at the top of her game and with her name written in lights all over the damn place. I'd sold a bunch of her chart-topping songs to her, and she paid really well, but she was such a pain to deal with now that she thought she was entitled to all my best stuff.

Still, she was a paying client and that was what kept me in this apartment, so far away from the shithole I'd grown up in. So I took her call, but I never played along with her chatty, flirtatious banter.

"This is Jesse. What can I do for you today, Ms. James?"

Her shrill giggle sounded at the other end of the line. "How many times have I told you to call me Rosie? Come on now, Jesse. We're past the Ms. James phase of our relationship, aren't we?"

"Fine. What can I do for you today, Rosie?"

"That's more like it," she said happily before she turned coy. "Well, actually, I'm in a bit of a bind and I was hoping you could help me out."

“What kind of bind?” I asked, but I already knew the answer.

Rosie was a fantastic singer with a voice that made teenage boys come in their pants and grown men fall to their knees, but she couldn't write for shit. I didn't know for sure, but I didn't think she'd written a single song in her entire life.

“I need some new material for my next album. You know you're my all-time favorite to work with. Have you got anything for me?”

“I'm fully booked for the next couple of months, but I can sit down with you after that.”

She made a noise of displeasure at the back of her throat. “I can't wait that long. Besides, I know you've got some good stuff lying around, gathering dust. We could start with those.”

The music industry was a bitch to work in. It was fickle, able to turn on you at any given minute. At this point, I was well known. I had a solid client base and I was doing alright, but if I pissed off the wrong person, it could all be over at the drop of a hat—or more accurately, the whisper of a few words in a few ears.

“Sure, Rosie. You're always welcome to take a look at the stuff I've already got, but I really won't be able to sit down and write for you until I've cleared my backlog a little.”

“Let's see what you've got,” she said. “I'm sure we can work something out.”

I sighed, hating that I had to pander to the likes of her, but it was all part of the job. As I looked out the view she helped me pay for, I nodded. “Yeah, we might be able to work something out. Send Henry over. I'll put some stuff together for him to pick up later.”

As soon as I put the phone down with her, the buzzer of my intercom went off, signaling that there was someone downstairs. I frowned. If Rosie had had her assistant hanging around outside while she spoke to me, he was going to have to wait until I had time to put the material together for her.

Pushing to my feet, I walked over to my front door and checked the little screen beside the intercom panel. A rare grin broke out across my face when I realized that it wasn't Henry here to pick up Rosie's new songs, but Callum downstairs.

My best friend, and one of the only ones I'd ever had, was a hunting guide. A good ole country boy who didn't take shit from anyone and didn't put on any airs or graces. With him, what you saw was what you got, and I respected that.

I buzzed him up without talking to him, then unlocked the front door and left it open as I went to the kitchen to grab us each a non-alcoholic beer. I didn't drink alcohol anymore, but beer still tasted good.

"You look like shit," Callum remarked cheerfully when he walked into my place. Dressed in jeans, a plaid shirt, boots, and carrying a cowboy hat in hand, he looked like he'd just walked off a photoshoot for some rodeo magazine. "What did you do? Put on a leather jacket and boots with your pajamas?"

I glanced down at my sweats and T-shirt, then shrugged as I held out the beer to him. "So what if I did? It's not like I'm going anywhere today."

Blue eyes shining with mirth, he took the beer and popped the top off, messing up his blond hair that'd been flattened by his hat before he turned to look out my windows. "There's a great big world out there. You might want to go explore it sometime."

I flipped him off, knowing he was joking but still not appreciating it. Laughing when he caught the gesture from the corner of his eye, he winked and blew me a kiss in return. "Fuck you right back, bud. You're becoming a hermit all holed up in here. You haven't even come to have a drink with me in days."

"Exactly," I said. "Days. Not weeks. Just days. I've been workin'. It might be a few more days before I can leave again now that Rosie's called again."

"Rosie James, huh?" He let out a low whistle, then rolled his pelvis and mimed spanking someone. "I'd tap that. Have

you?”

“What, slept with her? No. She’s a client.”

He arched a brow at me, a slight smirk appearing at the corners of his lips. “Correction, bro. She’s a hot, single, famous client who’s always flirting with you. You can’t tell me you haven’t thought about it.”

“I haven’t thought about it,” I said, completely deadpan. “She’s not my type.”

“She’s everyone’s type,” he argued, fully smirking at me now as he shook his head. “Seriously, man. Who hurt you?”

Rainey Hollenbeck. “No one hurt me. I’m just not interested in screwing around with my clients. Rosie buys a lot of songs from me and her career is just beginning to really take off. She’s twenty-four, Cal. She’s got years of the big-time ahead of her if she plays her cards right, which means I’ve got a great client in her for years if I do the same thing.”

He gave me a long look, but then he exhaled through his nostrils and dipped his chin in a nod as he sat down. “Yeah, I suppose that’s true. I still don’t understand why you don’t just sing the songs you write, though. Why sell them? They’re hits. Every last one of them. Now people like Rosie are getting all the money, fame, and glory for them and you’re sitting alone on your balcony with your guitar, and very few people even know they’re yours.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “I’ve told you before that I’m not interested in being in the limelight. Let the Rosies of the world get the fame and the glory. I’m still getting the money and I get to do what I love every day.”

Technically, that part wasn’t true. Well, I did love my job, but I didn’t *get* to do it. I *had* to do it. After Rainey left, I’d tried to stop writing music and start focusing more on my grades so I could get a *real job*. Nearly drove myself crazy trying to keep it all in. It just didn’t work.

Callum thought it over before he shrugged. “Yeah, that’s true. We both do what we love every day. What’s better than that, right? If it was me, I’d have wanted to be in front of a

crowd with my guitar instead of alone at home, but I can't sing for shit and the only instrument I can play is the drums on X-box."

"Bullshit. You're out there hunting everyday with only one or two other people with you. You'd have hated to live your life in front of a crowd, being chased down by reporters everywhere you go."

"True that," he agreed with a huge grin on his face. "The reporters would've chased away the animals. Who can hunt with a bunch of loudmouthed people shouting questions at them and stomping through the woods?"

"No one," I said. "Which is why I'm not interested in that life. I like writing, but that's where it ends for me. I'm already living my dream. I don't need to be mobbed by fans or performing in front of thousands of people to be happy."

"Right on." He held his bottle up and I clinked mine against it. Callum took a sip of his drink, and when he looked at me again, he frowned. "If that's true though, then what's bugging you? Something's going on."

"It's nothing big. It just would've been even easier for me if I had one company or client to work for. Doing it the way I am now means that I have to deal with a lot more people than I'm comfortable with, and I have to be *nice* about it."

I made a face on the word, and Callum's head tipped back as he laughed. "You're not nice to anyone about anything, but if you want to work for just one person or company, put the word out. You're a superstar in your own right. I'm sure someone would take you on."

"Yeah. Maybe." I toyed with the label on my bottle, ripping it off in little shreds as he caught me up on the date he'd been on last night.

When he was ready to leave, he stood and snapped his fingers when he reached the door, turning to look at me over his shoulder. "I came over to check on you, but I also wanted to tell you that I'm going duck hunting this weekend. Do you want to tag along?"

“Sure,” I agreed without even thinking about it. “Usual place?”

He nodded. “See you there, buddy. Have a good day not thinking about getting it on with the lovely Ms. Rosie James.”

Before I could even flip him off again, he slid out of my apartment, his laughter following him as he slammed the door behind him. I sighed. The guy was incorrigible, but it was good to have at least one person in my life that I could really talk to.

One was enough, though. People still sucked, and nothing was ever going to change my mind on that.

“How many pancakes do you want, baby?” I asked Jenna, wiping some sweat from my brow with my forearm as I turned away from the stove to look at her.

She was sitting at the breakfast nook in the kitchen, doing some extra reading for her English class. Tipping her head from side to side, she tore her gaze away from the book for a moment to smile at me. “I’ll have four, I think.”

“Please?”

She exhaled heavily, pretending to be put out about it before she added the magic word. “Please. Hey, did I tell you that Anna and her mom are moving to Staten Island?”

“No, but that’s great news. Did her mom finally get a job?”

“Yep. It’s out there, though, but she’s not moving schools yet.”

As she closed the book, I inclined my head toward it. “Are you done with your reading? You know the rules, young lady. All your homework has got to be done before school, or—”

“No TV, no phone, and no experimenting in the kitchen with Grandma,” she finished for me and let out a long-suffering sigh. “It was *extra* reading, Mom.”

“Sure, but it got assigned to you all the same. Are you done?”

She nodded. “I’m done. It’s a good story, though.”

“I remember reading it in school.” I smiled fondly at the memory. “It was a good story.”

It had also been one of Jesse’s favorite books, but I didn’t tell her that. She didn’t know anything about her father, and although it was becoming a stickier and stickier topic as she got older, it was better that way for now.

Besides, it wasn’t like I could tell her anything about him now. I’d intentionally avoided looking him up all these years. I didn’t know where he was or even if he was still alive. The thought that he might not be broke my heart, though, so I chose to believe he was happy, healthy, and living his best life wherever he was.

Sometimes I envisioned him writing in his notebook on some exotic beach, and other times, I wondered if he was slinging burgers at the diner around the corner from our old house in Texas. He hadn’t had much hope for his future back in high school, although he had seemed determined to make something of himself.

I hoped he had. He deserved to have everything he’d ever wanted.

Jenna’s head dropped to one side as she gave me a curious look. “What are you smiling about like that? The book isn’t funny.”

“No, it’s not,” I agreed. “I just used to know someone who loved it, and thinking about them made me smile. Now, come get your pancakes. We need to get a move on if you’re going to make it to school on time.”

She got up and picked up a plate I’d set out on the counter, carrying it over to the stove to get her pancakes while they were hot. As I watched her douse them in syrup, I was once again reminded of her father. Jesse used to love syrup. Everything sweet, really. He’d loved it so much that I’d often wondered if he ever even got to have it at home.

I went through phases when I thought about him a lot more often and it seemed I was in one of those phases. The older Jenna got and the more of him I saw in her, the more it

happened. I knew the time was coming when I'd have to talk to her about him, and that probably had something to do with it, too. I just didn't really want that time to come.

It was complicated, and although the wound of leaving him was old, it was still smarting. Sort of. Some days, anyway.

Urg. Stop it. Get your head in the game, Rainey. Sure, it was hard seeing her these days and not thinking about him, but the past was in the past and that was where it had to stay.

"Mom?" Jenna's voice broke into my thoughts and refocused my mind immediately.

"What's up, baby?" I asked as I looked over at her sitting across the breakfast nook from me. "Are we always going to live with Grandma and Grandpa?"

"No, my love. We're not. I'm saving money and we will be able to move out someday. They're just helping us out until that day comes, and besides, it's good to have them around, isn't it?"

She nodded. "It sure is, but Anna said her mom is really excited to move out of her grandparents' place. I love living here, but I also think it'd be kind of fun to be on our own."

"We will be," I promised her. "Maybe even sooner than we think. I've got some things going on at work that could get me a promotion if I do it right. It won't take me all the way to the top overnight, but it will get me noticed by the right people, so I can make it to the top one day."

She beamed at me. "You're going to make it to the top, Mom. You're the best."

My heart nearly burst with pride. "Thank you, honey. Eat up. We've got to get going."

More motivated than ever to do my job well, I dropped Jenna off at school and still managed to make it to my office early. Jenna and I lived in an apartment attached to my parents' place. It wasn't ideal, and I'd been wanting to move out for a long time, but I just hadn't been able to do it yet. Plus, it was extremely convenient to live with them.

They helped me out with Jenna *a lot*, and I didn't know how I would do it once we did move out. The apartment was part of their retirement plan, though. While I paid rent, I didn't pay what they would've been able to get for the place on the open market and moreover, since they still felt responsible for helping me with Jenna, they had less time on their hands to do their own thing.

As soon as I walked into my office, Rita looked at me with wide eyes. "Max wants to see you upstairs right away. His assistant said to hurry."

My blood nearly froze in my veins. This was it. They had to have a name for me. It was the shot I'd been waiting for. Now all I had to do was hope I could convince the songwriter they'd chosen to sign up with us, and I'd be in with a chance for a promotion to a higher level and on my way to the inner circle.

Dumping my purse right there on Rita's desk, I turned around again and hurried to the elevator. The executive floor had always intimidated me, but as I marched through the hallways now, I tried to envision what it would be like to work up here. For the first time, it felt like a real possibility that I might just make it.

Max had obviously taken an interest in me, and I'd been wondering if it was going to wane now that I'd given him an idea. I'd half expected him to forget all about me again. In the back of my mind, I'd really thought he'd find a songwriter and then hand the name off to someone else to approach them.

But he hadn't forgotten about me. He'd kept his word about giving me the name when he found someone, and I was damn well going to make him proud. Come hell or high water, I'd be signing this songwriter. Even if I had to go to the moon to do it.

And once I signed them, I was going to nurture them as a talent. Cultivate them and work with them so that we had masses of incredible songs ready to go for all our singers whenever they needed it. I'd sit in the studio and hammer out the songs with them to suit everybody's style if I had to.

Excitement swirled through me, turning my blood into helium and making it feel like I was floating as I approached his office. When I got close enough, I saw that the door was already open and his assistant waved me in as soon as I got there.

“You can go right in, Ms. Hollenbeck. He’s ready for you.”

A thrill shot through me. Max’s assistant knew my name. *That has to mean something, right? Right.*

“Sit down, Rainey,” Max said when I walked in. “Would you like something to drink? Coffee, perhaps?”

I nodded. “Yes, please. I’d love some. Just plain black for me.”

“A girl after my own heart.” He chuckled. “Why ruin it with cream and sugar or all that fancy new flavoring stuff, am I right?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Very well.” He picked up his phone and placed our order. Then he turned back to me with a satisfied expression on his face. “We found the guy that we need to recruit. He’s in Portland, Oregon, though. You’re good with traveling out there?”

“Yes, sir.” Thank God we were still living with my parents. I didn’t travel often but at least I knew when I had to, that Jenna was well taken care of and her day-to-day routine wasn’t interrupted at all. “I can definitely go to Portland.”

“Good, because I want you to take point on this. If it works out, it could be the break you’ve been looking for toward a promotion.”

I nearly choked on my next breath. “You know I’m working toward a promotion?”

He chuckled again, giving me a knowing look. “Isn’t everyone? Besides, I’ve been watching you for a while. You’ve been angling for it for quite some time, haven’t you?”

“I have, yes. I’ve been doing—”

He held up his hand to stop me just as his assistant came in with our coffees and placed them down in front of us on his desk. Once his assistant was gone, he lifted his mug and took a small sip, then sighed contentedly and looked back at me.

“You don’t have to tell me what you’ve been doing. Like I said, I’ve been watching you. I can’t guarantee anything, but if you sign this guy, you’ll be one step closer. Can you handle it?”

“Without a doubt,” I said confidently. “Just give me a name and I’ll bring him into the fold.”

“Excellent.” He grinned. Turning his attention to his computer, he tapped at his keyboard for a minute, then glanced back at me. “All of his information is in your inbox. You’ll have to get out there sooner rather than later. Wrap up whatever you need to wrap up here, and then get going. Don’t come back until you’ve got a signed contract in your hand. I’ll call ahead to set up a meeting for you as soon as you can tell me when you’ll be able to be there.”

“By this weekend,” I said immediately. “I’ll need to hand off a few clients temporarily, but I can get it all set up before Friday and be on the plane by the end of the week.”

“That’s wonderful news. You’ve got a great attitude, Rainey. The songwriter you’re going to recruit has been working with some of the biggest names in the industry. He might not want to give up his independence since he’s got such a full roster of his own, but I’m counting on you to convince him.”

“Of course. I can do it.” *At least, I hope I can.* “Who is he? I’d like to do some research on him before I go.”

“Jesse Slone,” Max said, and it was like all my blood drained out of my body, the world stopped turning, and the walls came crashing down around me all at the same time. “He’s from Texas. Just like you.”

Shit. Shit, oh shit. How many Jesse Slones can there be in Texas?

Probably a few, to be fair, but I had a feeling that not many of them were writers. My Jesse Slone had been a writer. I'd never known he was a songwriter, but that didn't mean much. He could've been writing anything in those notebooks he'd never let me look in.

My stomach turned to ice and my mouth dried up. Out of all the talent in all the world, why did it have to be Jesse Slone my promotion was depending on?

If it was him, did I even have any hope of getting a promotion anymore? After I'd left him without a word and hadn't spoken to him in a decade, what were the chances that he was even going to speak to me?

So many questions thundered through my mind that I didn't even know what Max said next, but by the time he waved me out of his office with a happy, confident grin on his lips, I knew that my personal history with Jesse didn't matter. I'd made myself a promise and it was one I was going to keep.

Come hell or high water, I'm signing Jesse as a client. And then all I can do is hope that both hell and high water don't come down on me if he ever finds out what I've been hiding from him for the last dozen years.

Life was weird sometimes. Just last week, I'd told Callum that my job would've been easier if I had just one client to work for and now, I was on the phone to Max Astor, the CEO of Gravity Talent Management, a big-time agency in New York City.

I didn't know what he wanted from me yet, but his assistant had called me a couple of days ago and the man himself was following up. Gravity was such a big company that even Rosie had understood when I told her that I needed to take a few minutes to speak to Max once my phone started ringing.

"How are you, Jesse?" he asked jovially, sounding like his personality was just as big as his reputation and the company he was at the helm of. "I've been hearing a lot of good things about you, son."

"Thank you," I replied, pacing up and down the hall outside the studio where Rosie and I were working on a song for her new album. "I'm doing well. You?"

"Better now that I'm speaking to you," he said, and unless he was as good of an actor as some of the people he represented, he was being honest about it. "So listen, I'm going to send a recruiter out there to speak to you. Is that something you'd be interested in, sitting down with one of my people?"

"Of course. I'm always open to new clients. I'll sit down with anyone any time, but I can't make any promises. My style

may not mesh with whichever one of your superstars needs a new song.”

He chuckled. “Why don’t you leave it to me to worry who your style may or may not mesh with? I’m not expecting any promises, but I’d appreciate it if you sat down with my girl and heard the offer we want to put on the table for you.”

“You’ve definitely piqued my interest,” I said. “It’s not Jake Holt, is it? I’m not sure I’ve got any songs he’d want to sing. My stuff tends to be more country than pop.”

“You can do anything you put your mind to if my sources are correct. Somewhere in there, you may just have some pop in you, but no. Today, it’s not about Jake. It’s about you. I’m sending one of my best and brightest up-and-comers out there to see you this weekend, if you’re available. She’ll break it down for you and let you know what we’re after. I think you’re going to like our offer, though. I sure hope you do.”

“This weekend?” Wow, that was soon. Whoever they needed material for must be in some real trouble. “I can make some time for a meeting this weekend. When are they coming out?”

“We’ll send a car to pick you up on Saturday morning. Nine a.m. Can you do that?”

“Sure thing.”

There wasn’t much I wouldn’t be able to do for a shot at a client like Gravity—if that was what they were after. Over and above that, though, the man had made me curious as hell, and if he had told me to be ready by nine p.m. tonight, I would have done that, too.

“Excellent. I’ll have my assistant send you an email to confirm and you can give us the address you’d like to be picked up from then.”

“That sounds good,” I replied. “I’ll be on the lookout for that email.”

“It should be on its way to you already.” He paused for a beat, and my phone chimed with an incoming email alert tone.

“There it is, son. Just send me that address and we’ll make all the arrangements on our end.”

He hung up before I had a chance to ask him who I would be meeting with, but it didn’t really matter. Anyone from Gravity was better than no one from Gravity. The company had to have some real money if they were flying someone out just to meet with me and send me a car, though.

Frankly, it didn’t come as a surprise. Obviously, they had a lot of money. The surprise was that they were spending some of it on me. I still wasn’t used to this kind of treatment, being wined and dined, wooed and sweet-talked. I still wasn’t really comfortable with it, either.

Gravity would pay me good money for a song for one of their clients, though. I was sure of it, and that was the only thing that really mattered. If I could get in with them on the regular, that would be even better, but even just one song for them would be enough.

As I walked back into the studio, Rosie watched me with wide brown eyes. “Was that really Max Astor?”

“Yeah, it was.”

“What did he want to talk to you about?” She patted the seat beside her on the piano bench that I’d been on earlier. “Come talk to Rosie. Maybe I can help. You look kinda confused.”

I sighed, rubbing the hair on the back of my head as I dropped back into my seat. “I’m not really sure yet. All I know is that he’s sending someone to meet with me this weekend.”

“You’re not going to leave me to go work exclusively for him in the Big Apple, though. Right?”

I shrugged. “Probably not. I doubt that’s what it was about. Besides, even if I had to move there, we could still keep working together. Are you ready to get started again?”

“Sure.” She peered at the sheet of music resting against the stand in front of her before glancing back at me, her pearly white teeth sinking into her plump lower lip. Ever since

Callum had brought it up, I couldn't help noticing that she really was beautiful.

I still wasn't interested in sleeping with her. She didn't do anything for me. But with her billowy red hair and the curves of a queen bee, she was gorgeous. The way she looked at me said she'd throw me one if I leaned in, but I didn't.

Unfortunately, blondes were still more my type. In some psychological clusterfuck, my dick was only really into curvy blondes with curly hair and bright blue eyes. The innocent-looking type who hid their cruelty behind pretty words and brilliant smiles.

Sure, I'd gotten around since high school. For a while there, I might even have gone looking for Rainey underneath every skirt I saw. I didn't find her, but I did find out a whole hell of a lot about myself. One of those things was that I had a sexual hangup—on girls who looked like the one who crushed me in high school.

C'est la vie, right? There was nothing I could do about it, and since it didn't get in my way much, I hadn't tried to change it. It wasn't like I couldn't hook up with anyone who didn't look like her. I just preferred not to.

As I stared at Rosie biting that lip of hers with those huge brown eyes glued to mine, I let out a soft sigh and shook my head. "What is it?"

"Do you really think you might be leaving?"

"No." I really didn't. "We should be focusing on the song, Rosie. Let's get it done, shall we? Your manager is going to shoot me if we leave here today without having it ready to go."

She giggled. "He wouldn't shoot you, but it's a good point. He wouldn't be happy. Okay, so tell me what you had in mind."

The one advantage of working with her so often was that she trusted me. Most of my clients did. I showed her what I'd had in mind for the song, and when I did, she went with it without arguing. She even had a few good ideas here and

there, making me think that I might've judged her too harshly before.

So what if she wasn't a writer? She knew what she wanted and she could fine tune a song until she got to it. Plus, she added a flare of her own to it and that was what made her the star. I just gave her the raw material.

"If they offer you a job in New York, would you take it?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe. You don't have to worry about it, though. If they do make me any kind of offer, I'm sure they'd want me to bring my existing clients with me."

Her eyes bounced from one of mine to the other. "You should stop underestimating your talent, Jesse. There are a lot of people who would kill to be able to write the way you do."

"It's no big deal. The songs just come to me and I put them to paper. Are we going to get back to work now?"

"It is a big deal. That's what I'm saying. I, for one, would kill to be able to write like you. I can write, but you do it better, which is why I'd rather work with you than to do it all by myself. Your songs are gold."

"Thank you." I turned my head back to the piano. "Let's take it from the top. We've still got a lot of work to do."

She pouted. "You're a very talented writer, but you're not very talkative. What's your story?"

"I don't have one. We're just not here to talk. If you want to talk, go grab coffee with a girlfriend. If you want to work, I'm your guy."

"Okay, I hear you. Did my friend Jose ever reach out to you? I sent him in your direction last month."

Jose Gunthrie, her friend, was another one of the biggest names in town right now. He was new to the scene but he was rising fast. "Yeah, he called me. I'm working on a few things for him right now. Thanks for the referral."

"Any time," she said, smiling as she turned back to the piano. "Okay, so we're taking it from the top?"

“We’re taking it from the top,” I agreed.

She sighed, but she was also still smiling. “You know, you’d be a lot more fun if it wasn’t all work and no play with you.”

“Playing didn’t get me out of the gutter and it’s not going to keep me out of it,” I muttered. “Hard work did that and it’s what’s going to keep doing it.”

“You’re from the gutter too?” she asked curiously before she perked up. “Same. Which gutter are you from?”

“The one I don’t want to talk about.” Seriously. I still didn’t talk about my father or where I’d come from with anyone. I wasn’t about to start with her now. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Nah,” she said. “It’s in the past, right? All that matters is where we are today.”

“Agreed. Does that mean we can finally get back to work now?”

“Sure. I’m going out for drinks with some people later. A lot of them are interested in meeting you.” She leaned over to whisper conspiratorially in my ear. “They’re artists who love what you’ve done for me.”

When she sat back again, I shook my head. “If they want to talk to me, give them my number. I don’t drink and I don’t do business in nightclubs.”

Her chin dropped. “For real?”

“For real. There’s no point in negotiating or trying to make deals with people who are intoxicated. It’s just not the way I operate.”

I’d learned all that the hard way. Despite my dad’s drinking problem, I hadn’t always abstained. Hell, once upon a time, I’d given him a run for his money with my daily consumption. Thankfully, all that was behind me now.

“Okay, Mr. Professional. Let’s get back to work but one day, I’m going to get your story out of you.”

“Good luck with that one.” I lifted the music off the stand and held it up in front of me, motioning to the part I thought we should tweak for her. “When we get here, try to fade it out. I think that works better than the abrupt end.”

By the time we were done for the day, Rosie, her manager, and I were all happy. I headed out to go meet with another singer who’d hired me a while back to write with him and Rosie went her own separate way. Callum would probably have said that I missed another opportunity with her, but it just wasn’t an opportunity I wanted.

For the rest of the week, I kept thinking about my upcoming meeting with Gravity and wondering what they wanted from me. I got all the emails confirming the meeting and that they would send a car, but I didn’t get any more information than that.

Whatever—and whoever—was coming my way, I hoped they wouldn’t be wasting my time. I didn’t buy into bullshit sales pitches and I wasn’t one to become everyone’s best friend. If it was possible for me to do my job without ever having to talk to anyone, it would’ve been the best job in the world as far as I was concerned.

The less people around me, the better. And that wouldn’t ever change.

Mom, Jenna, and I sat around a table at our favorite Italian place down the block from our house. If there was anything that would always calm them both down, it was melted cheese on Fabio's woodfired dough.

"You're really flying to Portland tomorrow?" Jenna asked after we'd placed our order. "How long are you going to be gone for?"

"I'm really flying to Portland tomorrow, and it'll only be for a few days." I reached across the table and squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry, baby, but I have to go. It's for work. I explained it to you the other day."

She sighed, her beautiful green eyes swimming with tears. My daughter clearly wasn't happy about the fact that I was leaving, but I understood why.

Mom could be a bit much at times, as I very well knew. Whenever I was gone and she was in charge, I knew that she wasn't the easiest on Jenna. She'd always had high expectations of me and she now had the same of my daughter.

Mercifully, my job didn't require me to travel often. I'd only ever had to go out of town to recruit a client a few times. I had clients all over the country, but more often than not, they came to me when they were in the city anyway.

A few other times, I'd set things up so that my travel would be happening over the school holidays and then I'd sprung for an extra plane ticket to take Jenna with me. It

would've been ideal if I was always able to do that, but in this particular instance, I was glad it wasn't a possibility.

We were smack dab in the middle of the school year and I wouldn't have been able to bring her to Portland anyway. Not with who I was going out there to recruit.

Part of me wished I didn't even have to go to Portland myself. I still had no idea what I was going to say to Jesse or how I was going to convince him to sign with us once he realized who I was. I didn't even know if he knew already. If he did, he might not even show up for our meeting.

Max's office had handled all the correspondence with him. They'd set up everything and they'd simply filled me in on it all after. It was a testament to how important Jesse was as a client that Max had done it all himself.

During my last meeting with him, my boss had been almost giddy. It turned out that he'd done some more of his own research on Jesse and now he was practically salivating to get him signed on. What he hadn't realized at first, apparently, was that Jesse was singlehandedly responsible for over two hundred of the top hits of the last couple of years.

I hadn't realized it either, but the more Max had told me about him, the more I'd understood his personal involvement. Not only was he some genius songwriter that seemed to churn out hits in his sleep, but he also had an impressive client base of his own and it was only growing by the day.

Bringing on someone like him could be a real game changer for us. By himself, he was a force to be reckoned with. A talent any agency would be lucky to represent, but he would also be a jewel in our crown for the promises we would be able to make any singer who signed with us.

Rumor had it that he wrote up to seven songs a day and that he never ran dry. The possibilities of what that would mean for us were endless and yet, I'd have given anything not to be the one who had to bring him on.

The last time I'd seen him he'd been a boy and I'd been a girl. We'd been kids who were doing things kids that age had

no business doing and yet so many of them did. In my own naivety at the time, I'd also been convinced I was in love with him.

Some days, I still believed I really had loved him. In a much more grown-up way than I'd been capable of back then. My parents had shut down all talk of him a long time ago, but right after we'd arrived in New York, they'd both made a point of explaining to me that regardless of how strong my emotions had been, they hadn't been real.

They'd told me that teenagers simply experienced things more intensely and that while I thought I loved Jesse, neither of us had even known what love was. As I'd gotten older, I'd realized they were right. I'd had no idea what was in store for me with Jenna and my emotions had definitely stabilized over the years.

Perhaps it was just because I looked at that time of my life the way I did that I still thought I might've loved him. Regardless of the fact that I'd gotten pregnant as a teenager, I didn't regret the time we'd spent together. Nor did I regret Jenna.

When I thought back on my days with Jesse, the memories almost always brought a smile to my face. We'd been good together even before either of us had known how special it was to find someone it felt so right to be with.

I liked to think that I'd brought out the best in him just like I knew he'd done for me. At the time, I'd needed that solid, stable, dependable presence. To know that I had someone reliable to turn to, someone trustworthy to talk to and take advice from. In his quiet way, he'd become my best friend, and in turn, I'd become his.

I'd been the one person he opened up to, who knew his heart and who he allowed to see it. We'd shared so much, and yet he'd also held a lot back. I understood that a lot better now.

When I saw him again, I'd be keeping secrets of my own. One huge secret specifically, and she was glaring at me from the across the table right now.

“Why can’t they send someone else?”

“Because recruiting a songwriter was my idea and it means a lot to me that they’re trusting me to approach this one. It’ll be a pretty big fish for the agency to land, and if I can manage him as a talent, it’d be a nice feather in my cap for a promotion.”

“Who’s the songwriter?” Mom asked. “Anyone I might’ve heard of?”

Not for the first time, I wondered if she’d kept tabs on Jesse even if she’d forbidden me from doing the same. Looking at her now, I got the distinct feeling that she knew he was a songwriter but I hadn’t even known until Max had told me a couple of days ago.

Curious but not willing to go there with her in front of Jenna, I shrugged. “Nah, I don’t think you’d have heard of him. He’s been working mostly out of Portland since he started. I don’t even know if he’s ever been here.”

Mom looked back at me, seemingly assessing me before she nodded. “Well, good luck. If this person is standing between you and a promotion, I hope you’ll knock it out of the park. God knows, you deserve to be promoted. You’ve been working so hard.”

Jenna rolled her eyes. “Do you have to go to Portland to get promoted? Why can’t you sign someone from right here? New York has a lot of people looking for agents. I’m sure you could find a songwriter here.”

“I probably could’ve, but this one was hand-picked by my boss and he’s got a list of hits longer than my arm. I won’t be gone long, though. In and out, I promise.” I rarely lied to Jenna. Whenever I did, it was inevitably on the subject of her father, and once again, that held true.

I didn’t know if I would be in and out. The length of my trip depended solely on whether Jesse would be willing to play ball with me or not. Obviously, I wouldn’t be gone for months but it was entirely possible that I’d be gone for longer than a night or two.

Mom smiled affectionately at her granddaughter. “We’ll be okay, Jenna. Let your mom go do what she needs to do.”

As I looked at the two of them together, I remembered a time when I feared my mother would never look at the child Jesse and I created like that. Contrary to my belief at the time, though, both my mother and my father had fallen in love with her right away.

“Is Dad still coming to join us?” I asked as I thought about him.

My mom shook her head. “He got called into a meeting. I’ll take something home for him.”

Our food arrived and we ate our dinner, my mother and daughter both finally moving on from the topic of my trip. I still had a lead weight in my belly about it, but I just had to man up and face the music—literally.

When Jenna and I lay down on her bed later that evening like we did every night before we went to sleep, she rolled over on her side and pushed a lock of her dark hair off her forehead as she looked at me. “She’s going to be a nightmare while you’re gone.”

“That’s your grandmother you’re talking about,” I warned before I relented. “But yes, she is going to be a nightmare. It’s only because she loves you so much, though. She just wants what’s best for you.”

“I know she does, but do you really promise to be home as soon as you can?”

“I do,” I promised again. “I can’t give a date that I’ll be back, but I won’t be gone long.”

“I hope not,” she murmured, leaning into me as her lashes fluttered closed. I stroked her hair, and for a while, we lay together silently, both of us lost to our own thoughts of what the next few days would hold. I knew she was anxious. So was I.

I hated being away from her and I always missed her more than I would a limb whenever we were apart, but I needed to go. My entire adult life, I’d been doing whatever it took to

give her the best life I could. This would be the hardest thing I'd ever had to do. It would be facing the music, my past, and the man who'd given me the greatest gift of all and didn't even know it, but I was still going to do it.

If I'd learned anything about myself in the last twelve years, it was that I was stronger than I'd ever realized a person could be. I'd faced more challenges and hurdles in that time than I could count, things I'd never even realized would seem so insurmountable, and yet I hadn't let any of it stop me.

Jesse Slone had a been a lot of things to me in my life. A crush, a lover, a friend, and a partner in crime. Right now, though, he was just another obstacle. Another challenge, and just like I had with all the others, I would come out on top. I just had to avoid getting on top of him again.

“A recruiter?” Callum asked at the other end of the line. “Are you serious? When did that happen?”

I walked out of the stairwell into the lobby of my building, taking a seat near the front panel of windows overlooking the street. “They called me while you were on your hunting trip this week. So thanks for the invite, but I can’t go target shooting with you later. I’ll be busy getting wined and dined by some big city schmooze trying to talk me into doing whatever it is they want me to do.”

He let out a low whistle. “That sounds like a big deal. Which agency?”

“Gravity Talent Management. They’re based in New York. Have you heard of them?”

He snorted. “Yeah, I have. Hasn’t everyone? Their CEO was a judge on that reality talent show a couple of years ago, wasn’t he?”

“That’s the one.”

“Maybe they want you to be part of a new reality TV show,” he joked. On the other hand, maybe he wasn’t joking. “That’d be a cool gig, don’t you think? You could help fledgling singers and songwriters hone their craft.”

“As long as I wouldn’t have to do those stupid confessional interviews, I’d consider it.” Actually, I’d only consider it if I wasn’t going to be featured on the show on TV at all. “It could be what they want to talk about, but I don’t

think so. I read somewhere that Max Astor said it just took up too much of his time being part of a show like that.”

“Well, I think it’d be fun if it is that. You really have no idea what they want?”

“Nah. They didn’t say. All I know is that they’re flying out one of their agents to meet with me and that they think I’m going to like the offer they’re putting on the table.”

He chuckled. “They must not know you if they think you’re actually going to like something.”

I looked out at the street in front of my building, watching the light traffic passing by and checking the clock on the wall. In seven more minutes, the agent should be here. If they were on time. If not, then at least I’d know I wasn’t that important to them.

“I like stuff,” I murmured distractedly, turning my attention back to the street.

It was a clear day outside, and while I’d have liked to take the weather as a good omen, it was bullshit. Bad things happened on nice days, too.

Callum chortled in my ear before he blew out a heavy breath. “Sure, you like stuff. You like staying at home and writing, and you like coming hunting with me on occasion. What else is there?”

“Not much,” I admitted. “I agreed to hear this guy out, though. If what they’re offering gets me in with Gravity, I’ll take the deal. I’ve heard they pay really well, and if I work with them, I’ll mostly be talking to the agent who ends up representing me. I wouldn’t have to deal with all the clients myself.”

“In that case, I hope it works out for you,” he said. “I mean, I don’t like the idea of you becoming even more of a hermit, but who knows? The annoying fucker coming to woo you might become a friend. At least then you’ll have two of us.”

I scoffed. “It may not be an annoying fucker.”

I practically heard him rolling his eyes. “It’s going to be an annoying fucker. Some fast-talking, big city schmuck who thinks you’re slow and stupid, but you got yourself into this predicament. There’s no backing out now.”

“I haven’t really thought about who the agent will be too much, but I think Max mentioned that it’s a woman. I’m pretty sure he said *she*.”

“Color me intrigued,” Callum said. “A woman, huh? Maybe it’ll even be one who can bring you out of your shell a little. Make you open up to her.”

Only one woman had ever done that for me, and the agent coming to see me was definitely not going to be *her*. “I doubt that very much. Besides, she’d be my agent, not my girlfriend.”

“Some people become friends with their agents, don’t they?”

I shrugged. “Sure. I think so.”

“Exactly, and where there’s friendship, there’s the potential for more.”

My eyes narrowed. “When you say more, you mean a fuck buddy, don’t you?”

“Your words, not mine, but yes. Would that be the worst thing in the world?”

“Doing the dirty with my agent? Yeah, it could be the worst thing in the world. Gravity could make things a lot easier for me. I’m not about to screw it up just to get off. I can get off just fine by myself. I don’t want to have to deal with so many clients by myself anymore, though. If I had to choose between the two, I know which one I’d rather do by myself and which one I’d prefer to have someone else handle.”

He heaved out an exasperated sigh. “You’re a lost cause, bro. Good luck with your meeting. I hope they’re bringing you something good.”

“So do I, but thanks. Enjoy target practice. I’ll be there again next time.”

“Right on,” he said. “Talk to you later.”

“Talk to you later.” I hung up the phone just as a limousine pulled up outside the building.

The sleek black car parked at the curb and I blinked a few times when I glanced back at the clock and realized that this might be the car they’d sent. *A limousine? Holy shit.*

I’d never been in one. Once I could afford it, I’d considered renting one just for the hell of it, but I’d never followed through. It’d seemed like too much of a waste.

As I stared at the car, I tried to remember what I’d been expecting when Max had said they’d send one for me. I couldn’t remember, but it definitely hadn’t been this. In fact, I’d been a little confused about why he’d even want to send someone to pick me up instead of just asking me to meet the agent somewhere.

I stood up slowly once the car was parked, a tremor of nerves running through me. I didn’t get nervous often, but I’d never been approached by a company like Gravity. Dealing with singers and their people had become second nature to me, and even the most famous people I’d worked with were, at the end of the day, only people. People who needed my help, at that.

I’d never really gotten nervous about meeting with them. This, however, was different. Gravity represented hundreds of the biggest stars in a number of different industries. Music was just one of those industries, and they were huge in it.

The same could be said for acting, sports, influencers, socialites, models, and authors. They were huge in every industry, and now they wanted me. As the magnitude of that thought sank in, another tremor ran through me.

There had been a time when I’d have run to that car, flung myself into it, and signed the paperwork they wanted me to sign without asking any questions. I wasn’t like that anymore, though. I was still hungry for success and for the security offered by a lucrative career, but I was also more cautious than I’d ever been before professionally.

In some ways, I still felt like one wrong move could land me back in Texas in the housing inside the trailer park. It wouldn't happen. I'd saved and invested enough to make sure that it was highly unlikely that I'd wind up back there, but still. It was a mindset. I was determined to do everything I had to not to become my father.

As I moved toward the exit of my building, the driver climbed out of the limousine at the curb and walked at a brisk pace down the length of the car. My eyes almost rolled at the sight. The agent was definitely going to be an annoying fucker if she couldn't even manage to open her own door, but she was probably just—

The thought died a slow death when the driver opened the door and a petite pair of feet encased in skyscraper heels appeared. I didn't have a thing about feet. They didn't turn me on and I didn't want to suck on her toes or anything, but even just her feet said she wasn't from around here.

In my neighborhood, most people were artists. We wore boots and sneakers or leather-strapped sandals, not heels that looked like they'd cost more than the car she'd arrived in.

For a second, I wondered if she was even going to let those shoes touch the dirty sidewalk outside, but there was no hesitation in her movements as she planted her feet on the ground. As I watched, her calves became visible next, smooth from a distance and perfectly toned.

Her skin was a creamy porcelain that looked like it'd never seen the sun, and as she climbed out of the car, my gaze traveled up slowly. I'd stopped moving at some point, but I'd also already decided to indulge my curiosity before I went out there.

The windows were made of mirrored glass. There was no way she could see me staring at her from in here, and I wanted to size her up before I met her. I was a pretty good judge of character. If she was here to bullshit me, I'd be able to see it from a mile away.

When things seemed too good to be true, they usually were. A guy like me getting an unexpected, unsolicited phone

call from a company like Gravity was one of those things. It was too good to be true, and while I was a skeptic by nature, I was more skeptical about this meeting than I had been about anything in a long time.

As she stepped out from around the door, I took in the professional black pencil skirt and the white ruffled blouse hugging a decidedly curvy frame. It was the wisps of blonde curls that fell loose to her waist that made me abandon my decision to take this slow.

My gaze snapped up to her face the instant I saw that hair, and my breath shuddered when I sucked it in. *No way. No fucking way.*

But obviously, there was a way. Unless the universe had sent me Rainey's doppelganger, I was, in fact, staring at my ex-girlfriend. She still wore her long blonde hair in the exact same way, except that she'd ditched the bangs for a more sophisticated, clean forehead look.

She even still had on a headband. Not a flowered one like she'd been wearing the last time I'd seen her, but a checkered, black-and-white accessory that kept her hair out of her face. Those blue eyes were the same too, except for the fact that they were sharper now. Sharper, and filled with trepidation.

So she knows she's meeting with me. It made sense that she'd been told who she'd be meeting with, but it still took me a minute to wrap my head around the knowledge that she'd had almost a week to prepare for seeing me again while I'd have mere minutes to come to terms with it.

Part of me wanted to be pissed off about it, but it was probably for the best. I did better at spur of the moment things anyway. Plus, I didn't know if I'd have shown up if I knew it was going to be her.

Rainey Hollenbeck is a talent agent now, and she's working for one of the biggest agencies in New York City. How the hell did that happen?

She'd always been smart. It wasn't that throwing me off. Rainey was a girl who could've done anything she chose. I

just hadn't expected that talent management would've been her choice. On the other hand, I hadn't expected her to just leave me in the dead of night without saying a word to me about it either.

Maybe I never knew her at all.

Maybe I didn't know myself as well as I thought I did either, because I'd expected to be angry when I saw her again. I'd always thought that same old rage would slam back into me and that I'd tear her a new one for what she'd done.

As I looked at her now, though, I didn't feel any rage. I wasn't angry with her. She still looked way more innocent than she had any right to, but that wasn't why I wasn't pissed. I wasn't the type to see a pair of pretty eyes and stop thinking logically or feeling whatever I was feeling.

Rainey had been seventeen when they'd left. I'd long since figured out that she probably hadn't had any say in the matter. I doubted her parents would've given her a choice. What I didn't know was why she hadn't said goodbye or reached out to me again after, but to be fair, I hadn't reached out to her either.

In the years that'd followed, I'd never looked her up on social media or even typed her name into a search engine. It stood to reason that she hadn't done it either.

Instead of anger racing through me, an intense melancholy took hold of my soul. I was looking at the girl I'd once loved for the first time in a dozen years and I had no idea what to make of the fact that she was here or that I was about to spend some time with her.

Whatever happened, this day had just taken a turn for the interesting. It'd been years since I'd been shocked or surprised, and it was a novel feeling, but not in a bad way. In a random twist of fate, Rainey Hollenbeck was here to woo me into signing with her company.

Yeah. This is definitely going to be interesting.

The limousine pulled up outside of a trendy, modern building in a decidedly artistic neighborhood. I'd never been to Portland before, but on my way to pick him up, we'd passed so many bars, restaurants, coffee shops and carts, art galleries, and live music venues that there was no mistaking the kind of area this was.

There were colorful murals on most of the exterior walls and all kinds of performers on the streets. It'd brought a smile to my face when I'd first picked up on it to know that he lived in a place like this. It seemed fitting somehow, even if I didn't know how on earth he'd landed up here.

For all of his brooding darkness, he'd always been a creative soul, preferring to lie on the grass in the shade and read a book rather than join the football team. We'd done our homework by the water under a tree, and while I'd been struggling through algebra problems, he'd already be done and he'd just sit there, inspecting a dried leaf between his fingers and running the pads of them over the contours.

I'd thought it was all part of his brooding, mysterious persona at the time, but now I was wondering if there had been more to it. For such a quietly confident guy who'd never seemed to care what anybody thought of him, it'd struck me as odd that he was always reading or scribbling in that notebook of his, but now I knew better.

None of those revelations made a lick of difference to how nervous I was, though. I'd just pulled up outside of Jesse

Slone's building, and any minute now, he was going to walk out of it to meet me. My hands were shaking as I sat in the backseat of the fancy limousine Max had hired for me to pick Jesse up with.

I sat there for so long trying to get my nerves under control that the driver finally climbed out and walked along the car to open the door for me—even if I had told him before that it wasn't necessary. I didn't blame him for assuming that was what I'd been waiting for, though. If I was him, I'd probably have thought the same thing if the crazy, shaky lady in the backseat didn't move a muscle after I'd parked.

As the door opened, I dragged in a deep breath and held it for a long second. This was it. The moment I'd been waiting for since I'd been seventeen—the moment I'd see Jesse Slone again.

Shit.

Turning slowly toward the open door, I forced my feet to move. My legs felt wooden, heavy, and numb. When I finally managed to plant my feet on the ground, I pushed up slowly from the seat, letting my lids flutter closed before taking yet another deep breath.

This wasn't the end of the world. What was the worst that could happen, he found out about Jenna and tried to take her from me now that he was a big shot songwriter? An almost hysterical giggle tore out of me at the thought.

No, he wouldn't do that. That was ridiculous.

Straightening up to my full height, my head broke free from behind the door and I wondered if he could see me from wherever he was. I'd arrived right on time, and while I didn't see him or anyone else standing in front of his building and I couldn't see past the mirrored glass into it, I still felt eyes on me.

A trickle of awareness ran down my spine. There were definitely eyes on me, even if I couldn't see them.

Shaking out my hands at my sides, I gave myself a final pep talk and then looked directly at the building, searching for

the entrance. If he wasn't going to come out to meet me, I was going to have to go in to get him.

At that exact moment, as if he'd heard the thought, the door opened and Jesse Slone stepped out onto the sidewalk. Twelve years older and definitely a lot more mature, but the man I was looking at was also unmistakably Jesse.

The eyes that met mine were the same ones I looked into every morning when I went to wake his daughter for school and the same ones I saw every night before they fluttered closed for the last time that day. Apart from the fact that his face had lost every last bit of boyhood and now held the sharper, more defined lines of an adult, he still looked like him.

That face was still the same face I'd swooned over when I'd first seen him back in freshman year, and it was the same face I'd held while I'd kissed those full, cupid's bow lips. My heart stopped beating in my chest for so long that it was dizzying as I stood there and stared at that face.

The face I'd loved. The face I'd missed for more than a decade now. The face that looked... amused. *Wait. That can't be right.*

Blinking hard, I shook myself out of my trancelike state of staring blankly and refocused. When I did, I realized that I had been right. He did look amused. Underneath that messy black hair and those mesmerizing eyes, his lips were quirked into a half-smile that made him look like he thought this was hilarious.

Of all the things I'd been expecting him to think when he saw me again, hilarious wouldn't even have made my top one hundred. Walking out of the building, he let the door close on its own behind him as he stopped moving, his eyes on mine as we looked at each other face-to-face for the first time in so long.

Jesse seemed even taller now than he had been. Perhaps he'd grown a few more inches, but it might also just have been the way he was carrying himself now. He'd always been

confident and self-assured, but there had always seemed to be an invisible weight on him.

That weight was gone now. He stood tall and proud, his shoulders broad and open. He'd bulked up a little, too. He was still lean, but I had a feeling that if I stripped him out of his clothes, I'd find his muscles more bulging than defined like they had been before.

Just the thought of stripping him out of his clothes made heat blossom on my cheeks. *That's the last thing I should be thinking about right now. Or ever.*

He wore jeans, a leather jacket, black cowboy boots, and a fitted black T-shirt. My chest filled with warmth as I looked at him. It didn't help my determination not to think about stripping him when he still dressed the way he had when I'd been allowed to strip him down.

Jesse's style obviously hadn't changed much and neither had the way he looked, but there was definitely something different about him. That weight had disappeared, but it wasn't just that. There was something else about him, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

We still hadn't said a single word to each other, so I wasn't too hard on myself about not being able to pinpoint what else was different. Eventually, after another long minute of just staring at each other, he finally moved into motion again, striding toward me with intentional, long steps that ate up the distance between us.

"Rainey," he said softly once he was only a few feet away. "This is a surprise. You're with Gravity now?"

I managed a jerky nod, but hearing his voice was like having a bucket of electricity tipped over my head. *That doesn't even make any sense, but still...*

A bucket of electricity being dumped out over my head was the closest I could get to describing what it felt like to hear that low, gravelly timbre of his again. It was rougher now than it had been before, though I didn't know why. It might've

been because he'd started smoking or maybe it was just what time had done to his voice. *No idea. Nope. Nope. Nope.*

Even though I knew he couldn't hear my thoughts, my cheeks heated even more because I knew what was going on in my head right now. And it was bad. *Bad. Bad. Bad.*

One sentence, and he'd already scrambled my brain all over again. *Wow. It's no wonder I got knocked up so young. Were my thoughts always this weird around him?*

I couldn't remember if they had been, but what I did know was that I wasn't a teenager anymore. I was a grown-ass professional woman who was here to do a job, and I needed to get a damn handle on myself.

"Yes, I am with Gravity. I've been working there for six years as a talent agent." *There. Words. Articulate. Words. Sentences. Urg.* "So I guess I know now what you were always writing back in high school then, huh?"

He nodded, and when his lips kicked up into another half-smile, the thoughts I'd managed to regain scattered again. *So pretty, my Jesse. Hold me. Love me.*

No! Get. A. Grip.

An awkward beat of silence passed between us while I waged a war with my own brain. Part of me insisted on appearing to be aloof and professional while the other part was all for being reduced to a gooey puddle of former intelligence.

Crap.

Jesse looked into my eyes, those forest greens curious and intense, but I still didn't see any trace of anger in them. "Do you want to sit for a minute? You look like you need to sit for a minute."

I let out a weird giggle-groan sound and then clapped my hand over my mouth and simply nodded my agreement. His brows twitched up, but then he gestured at a bench in the shade of a giant tree on the other side of the street.

Once again, I simply nodded and then followed him when there was a gap in the traffic. We sat down side by side,

neither of us saying anything for the longest time. The silence grew more awkward by the minute, and when I glanced at his profile, I saw that his jaw was tense and his knees were bouncing, his hands hopping between them as his elbows rested on his thighs.

Our meeting was not off to a good start, to say the least. If I had any hope of returning home with a signed contract in hand instead of just a bunch of awkward memories of silence and half-smiles, I needed to do something to turn this around.

“How have you been?” I asked finally, going with the most obvious question to break the silence. “It’s been a while, huh?”

“Yeah, it has.” His chest rose and fell on a deep breath. He sat up again and turned toward me, moving one of his arms to the back of the bench and extending it until he was almost touching my shoulders. He looked more comfortable now, but I wasn’t.

Facing him directly was much more intimidating than I’d thought it would be. He kept looking straight into my eyes as he answered my question. “I’ve been good. Made it here, didn’t I? How about you?”

“I’ve been good. Busy, but who hasn’t, am I right? That’s what our twenties and thirties are for. Humping our busts and —”

His eyebrows shot up and laughter sparked in his eyes. “Humping our busts? Do you mean *busting our humps*, or have you discovered some new kink where you’re into humping busts? If you have, that’s okay. I don’t shame kinks.”

“What? No, I haven’t—I mean, I don’t...” I didn’t even know what to say to that.

“It’s okay, Rainey. By the time we’re about to hit thirty, most people have probably discovered some kinks they didn’t know they had back in high school.”

I haven’t slept with anyone since you! How am I supposed to have discovered new kinks? I’m too busy raising our daughter and living with my parents who are still, legitimately, watching me like a hawk when it comes to dating and men.

“Are we seriously talking about kinks right now?” I asked instead of trying to explain myself without giving anything away.

Jesse chuckled, but at the same time, he also gave his shoulders a little shrug. “Sure, I guess we are.”

“God, this is weird.”

He nodded. “Yeah, it is. I am curious now, though. Have you discovered any kinks since high school?”

“No, and we can’t be talking about this.”

“Why not?” He cocked his head at me. “We can talk about anything we want.”

“Yeah, but like, normal stuff. Also, we’re supposed to be talking business.” I cut myself off before I started rambling. “Okay. I have an idea. How about we make today about catching up rather than me trying to sign you? Let’s just start over and take it slow. As things are standing now, I don’t think you’re about to get on a plane and come back to New York with me this afternoon, so let’s just take a step back.”

“Come back to New York with you this afternoon?” He brought a large hand to his chest and batted his eyelashes at me. “Are you asking me to move in with you? Is that what this is about?”

“No, I—” While I was sputtering and trying to come up with an answer, something I’d only seen once or twice before started happening—Jesse Slone burst out laughing.

The sound was carefree and easy, and I basked in it until it ended as abruptly as it’d started. “I was joking, Rainey. Ease up. Come on. I think taking the day to catch up instead of doing business is a great idea. Let’s go.”

Scooting to the edge of the bench, he stood up and held his hand out to me. I eyed it warily for a moment before taking it, but when I did, there was something in the back of my mind that whispered, *here we go again*.

The worst thing of all? I wanted that voice to be right.

The tension eased for us when we finally decided to catch up instead of trying to just blow past everything that had happened and try to do business with each other. As we strolled down the street toward a small bistro I thought would make for a good first stop for coffee, I still couldn't believe she was here.

I also couldn't believe how easy it was to talk to her. I hadn't spoken to anyone else like this since her. Not even Callum. It had taken me eighteen months of befriending him before I'd had my first proper conversation with him.

Rainey had made me feel this way once before, though. This whole day seemed weird, as sinking back into it with her came as naturally as breathing.

"When did you become so easygoing?" she asked as we walked, close enough that I could feel her at my side but not so close that we were touching.

I glanced at her. "Easygoing? That's not something I've ever been accused of before."

"Not?" She frowned. "Are you sure? I don't remember you talking quite so easily."

"I don't remember you being quite so flustered."

Red streaks broke out across the tops of her cheeks. "Me? I'm not flustered. This is just weird. I get to rambling when things are weird. You know that. Or maybe you've forgotten. You used to know that, though."

“Still do,” I said, running my hand along my jaw as I considered how much more to tell her on this topic. “Let’s just leave it at, I haven’t forgotten much about you.”

She cast a sideways look at me while we walked. “You haven’t?”

“No, I haven’t.” I tapped my temple, joking to play down the admission I’d just made. “I have the memory of an elephant.”

“Oh. Right.” We fell into silence again, but it was a little more relaxed this time. I let it drag on until we reached the coffee place. We ordered two plain black coffees, and once we sat down at small white table on the terrace, I gave her my full attention. “So, how’s life been treating you?”

“Aside from humping busts, you mean?” she asked, finally seeing the humor in her earlier verbal misstep. Smiling up at me, she rocked her head from side to side like she was trying to decide where to begin. “Life has been good to me. There’s nothing I can really complain about. I mean, I probably could complain, but I don’t want to. In general, I’m good.”

“You’re happy?”

She paused for a moment, then she nodded. “I am. How about you? You seem to have made quite a name for yourself.”

“I have, but I didn’t do it on purpose. I’d have sold my songs anonymously if I could, but it doesn’t really work that way if you want to build long-lasting relationships with well-paying clients who want to sit and work with you.”

She smiled again. “I can see you preferring to work anonymously. You’ve always been writing songs, then?”

“Yep. I didn’t realize that was what they were at first. I thought they were just random words. Poems maybe, but no. Eventually, I figured it out. All in all, I’d say I feel about the same way as you. Life has been good to me. I could complain, but I don’t really have much to complain about.”

“That’s good,” she mused, staring at the steam rising from the small hole in her takeout cup before looking back up at me. “Is your career as exciting and flourishing as it appears to be?”

My eyebrows jerked. “Exciting?”

“Yeah. Exciting. You have some pretty famous clients. It’s got to be exciting to work with people like that.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s exciting. They’re just people. As for my career, I don’t know if it’s flourishing, but it’s going well. Yours?”

“Same. It’s going well. I keep my head down and I work hard, and I think my boss is finally starting to notice it, so that’s good. Maybe one of these days, I’ll make a name for myself just like you’ve done.”

“If that’s what you want, I have zero doubt in my mind that you’ll do it.” I didn’t like the uncertainty that flickered in her eyes when I said it. I really didn’t doubt that she’d achieve anything she set her mind to, but she seemed to doubt it.

Rainey had never been overly confident, and even less so in our relationship, but she hadn’t been uncertain about her abilities either. As she looked back at me, her expression softened. “You know, I really thought that if we ever saw each other again, you’d be angry at me.”

“I was angry at you,” I admitted. “For a long time, I was furious at you, but that was years ago. We were kids.”

“So you’re not pissed off at me anymore?”

I shrugged. “Nah. I don’t think so, at least. Maybe it’s just the surprise of seeing you when I wasn’t expecting to, but right now, I’m not pissed. Like I said, we were kids. We fooled around for a few months. It’s not like we were married or planning a life together after dating for years.”

While it was technically true, it didn’t feel like anything other than a gross understatement of what she’d meant to me back then. She’d been my best friend and she looked at me like I was still hers. After all these years, that hadn’t changed. The way she looked at me still made me feel like I could be a superhero if that was what she needed me to be.

Something like hurt flashed in her eyes before she nodded. “You’re right. We were kids who fooled around for a few months. Nothing more.”

Her words felt like they should've been passive-aggressive, but she simply stated them as fact. Deciding not to get hung up on it, I changed the topic. "Did you always know you wanted to be a talent agent?"

She blinked hard, like I'd switched gears way too fast, but then she caught up and shook her head. "To be honest, I didn't even know it was a real job that anyone could get. I never considered it for myself until I moved to New York. It sort of came up as an option while I was studying marketing and it intrigued me, so I looked into it."

"And here you are?"

"Here I am."

Genuinely impressed, I grinned at her. "See, you really can do anything you put your mind to."

"So can you. I always knew you liked music, but only because you always had your earphones in or hanging around your neck. I never knew you were considering it for a career."

Damn it. Now that the tables had turned, this topic wasn't so fun anymore. "That's because I wasn't considering it for a career. Music was what helped me through everything that—" Abruptly stopping the sentence, I took a breath and shrugged. "Music has been my life for as long as I can remember. I just never thought I'd make money out of it."

Understanding shimmered in her eyes as she dipped her head in acknowledgment. "How did that happen?"

"Me making money out of it?"

"Yep. How did you become Jesse Slone?"

I cleared my throat when it felt like her words were a fist being wrapped around my neck. "It was an accident. I was in a bind and I needed some cash, so I was searching a website for jobs I could do online. I came across an ad of a guy looking for a songwriter. I applied. Sent him a few examples of my work but didn't think I'd ever hear back from him."

"I'm assuming you heard back from him?"

“I did. He loved what I’d done and he asked me if I’d be available to write a song for one of his clients. The dude was a country singer who’d just gotten out of rehab and was trying to break into the scene. I wrote the song, he loved that too, and it just kind of went from there.”

Rainey gave me one of her big, signature smiles that made me feel like I’d accomplished something massive. At least this time, I had. Back when I used to get those from her, I hadn’t accomplished shit and yet she’d made me feel like I had.

“I love that story,” she said honestly. “It’s exactly the kind of story I was hoping you’d have.”

“You were hoping things for me?”

Her eyes widened to the point where she looked affronted. “Of course, I was. What do you think I am, a monster? All I’ve ever wanted for you was the best.”

Clearly, she couldn’t have thought she was what was best for me then. Me? I’d always thought that she was. Or that she could’ve been, at least.

As the day wore on, we strolled around and I showed her some of Portland. She was as excitable as I remembered her being, happy to see even the smallest things like my favorite mural or a flower blossoming in a park.

Rainey had a way of seeing beauty in things that I’d never understood, but which fascinated me now more than it ever had. Strangely, I was happy to just tag along with her and to have her show me my city through her eyes.

So many new lyrics flooded my mind as we walked that afternoon, I insisted that we sit down in the park for a bit so that I could write them down. She didn’t argue, going for a walk along the paths while I sat down on my ass on the grass and wrote.

When she finally got back to me, my mind was quiet and all it took for her to know was one look. “You really haven’t changed much. Do you want to go out to dinner?”

“I have changed, but some things about me never will,” I countered. “Do you really want to take me to dinner?”

Her eyebrows danced as she looked back at me. “I have a black company credit card to charge our expenses to. I think they’re expecting me to take you to dinner, so I think we should.”

“Okay. Let’s do it, then.” I hadn’t quite been ready to walk away from her for the day anyway. The fact of the matter was that I was having fun spending time with her, and since she hadn’t pitched me yet, it didn’t really feel like work.

During dinner, things flowed as easily between us as they had all day. Why I hadn’t ever found anyone else who it felt so good to be around, I didn’t know, but I hadn’t. Rainey just brought it out in me without even trying. And I didn’t fight it because why would I?

It was nice to just be able to *be* with another person without it feeling like a ton of effort. I hadn’t felt it in years, so I was rolling with it. Besides, there was a lot left for us to talk about.

After dinner, I knew that the day had come to an end. “Are you taking me home now in that fancy-ass limo before it turns back into a pumpkin?”

“Well, I could take you home, but I want to go dancing. The choice is yours whether you’d prefer to go home or if you’d like to come out with me.”

“Dancing?” I stared at her blankly. “You’re telling me that I have a choice between going dancing with you or going home? By myself?”

“Yep.”

“I don’t dance.”

She sighed, seeming disappointed as she nodded. “In that case, I’ll take you home.”

“No, don’t. I don’t dance, but I’ll come with you. Fair warning, I also don’t drink anymore.”

“I figured.” She shot a pointed look at the sparkling water I’d ordered earlier. “I want to go dancing, though. Not drinking. So are you in or out?”

No way I was letting her go out dancing in a strange city all by herself at night. It had nothing to do with me and it sure as hell wasn't my job to protect her, but I was going to do it anyway. All those old protective instincts were back in full force. As was the possessiveness and even the pure, uncontrolled lust I'd felt for her as a damn teenager.

So no. While Rainey Hollenbeck was in town, I wasn't letting her go dancing alone. "I'm in, but that doesn't mean that I'm going to dance."

A slow, brilliant smile crept onto her lips as she gave me a knowing look. "We'll just see about that, Jesse Slone. We're going dancing, and I'm sure not going to be doing it alone."

I *should've danced alone last night.*

Before I even opened my eyes the next morning, memories of why dancing with him the night before had been a bad idea flooded my mind. Being that close to him again had been torturous. Moving with him even more so.

As much as I hadn't wanted to want him again, I did. I *so* did. I hadn't felt need like that since the last time I'd been with him, and contrary to what my parents had told me, it had become obvious to me last night that it hadn't just been my out of control teenage hormones that had driven me to him.

Jesse was like a drug to me, and I desperately wanted another hit. As a teenager, he'd been intoxicating but now, he was even more potent.

At first, when we'd arrived at the local bar that he'd told me became a dancing venue after hours, he'd dug his heels in and refused to dance with me. I should've let it go, but I hadn't. Instead, I'd literally pulled him onto the dance floor with me, and by the time I'd realized my mistake, it had been too late.

My body had been glued to his, and his forehead had been against mine, his hands on my hips and his eyes making all these dirty promises that I hadn't given him a chance to keep. Something my body was seriously hating me for now.

As I lay in bed in my hotel room, aching for him and unable to shake how good it'd felt to spend time with him again, I'd thought back to the very first song we'd danced to.

It was one I'd loved for years now, but I hadn't known that he'd written it until last night.

It'd been remixed into a more upbeat dance tune, but the lyrics had always resonated with me and now I knew why. They'd come from the mind of the man I gelled with more than any other one I'd ever met.

Pressed up against me, I'd seen the flare of possessive jealousy in his eyes when he'd asked me if I did that for all my clients. I'd also seen the rush of belief when I'd told him that I hadn't been doing it for him, but for myself.

There was something undeniable between us, and even though I'd promised him we'd talk business when we saw each other this morning, I kind of wanted just another day with him. I was playing with fire. With my heart and his, but I couldn't stop myself.

First, because I really did need to see him to talk business, and second, because I just didn't want to stop. All I'd been since I'd last seen him was a mother, a daughter, and an employee. Now, I just wanted to be me.

Rainey Hollenbeck. Woman.

Jesse made me feel more like that woman than I had in a long time—if ever. More than that, he made me feel like it was okay to just be me. He didn't look at me in that way that made me feel guilty for enjoying myself for once, even though I was a mother and I should've been home with my daughter instead. Nor did he look at me like I was an employee gone rogue for spending the day with a potential client and not pitching them every second minute.

The thing about that part of it was that I had considered pitching him right there on that park bench yesterday morning. It wouldn't have worked, though. I'd have pitched him and he'd have turned me down. We'd needed the day to go just the way it had for me to stand a chance of returning to New York with a signed contract in hand.

The contract wasn't what I was thinking about as I lay there burning for him, though. I considered doing something

about it, but then my phone rang. As soon as I saw the screen, I forgot about what I wanted and switched right into mom mode.

“Hey, honey. How are you? How is it going with Grandma and Grandpa?”

“She’s a bitch,” Jenna complained immediately. “It was Saturday yesterday and she made me do all my homework. All of it. Do you know what she has planned for today? More homework.”

“Language, baby. She’s your grandmother. You can’t call her a bitch. She’s just trying to look out for you. That being said, if you’ve already done all of your homework, then what homework is she making you do today?”

“She downloaded a bunch of extra worksheets and assignments from the internet. Apparently, I need to start getting ahead if I want to get into a good college.”

I sighed, squeezing my eyes shut as I tried to think about the best way to handle this. “Getting ahead is never a bad idea, but I hear you. You need to take a break this weekend or you’ll go into the week exhausted. Let me talk to her, okay?”

“Okay, but when are you coming home?”

“Soon,” I promised. “It’s going okay with the client so far, but he hasn’t signed the contract. I just need a little more time to convince him. It’s only been one day. I’m sure you can handle a couple more.”

Although I couldn’t see her, I heard her pouting when she replied. “I can’t handle a couple more, Mom. She’s insufferable. How did you survive?”

Barely, but I’m not telling her that. “You’ll be fine, honey. I’ll be home before you know it and I’ll make sure she gives you a break today. Okay? You’re sure you’ve done all your homework?”

“I’m sure. She’s even checked it.”

I smiled. “Of course, she has. Okay, let me talk to her. Just be on your best behavior for me and I’ll see you soon.”

She let out another long, exaggerated sigh. “Okay, Mom. What are you going to do today?”

“I’m going to try to get the contract signed,” I said. “Do you want me to tell you a little bit about Portland?”

When she agreed, I told her all about the neighborhood Jesse lived in—but omitted to mention the man himself. I told her about everything I’d seen and done, and then I told her about all the things there were here for us to do together if we ever visited on vacation.

By the time she hung up the phone, she was placated and ready to face the day with my parents while I wondered what had happened to my baby. Two more years, and she’d be a teenager. This preteen phase was rough already. I had no idea what was waiting for me around the corner. It scared me to death that I’d been only six years older than she was now when I’d gotten pregnant, and I was not looking to worrying about that when the time came.

Panic gripped my insides just thinking about it, and not for the first time, I wondered how Jesse would’ve handled it if he was in her life. I’d come so close to telling him about her so many times yesterday, but it wasn’t the kind of thing I could dump on him out of the blue twelve years later.

If I told him, it would be on my own time. When it felt right. At the moment, it didn’t. He had a good thing going here for himself and he seemed genuinely happy. Before I turned his life upside down, I needed to know it would be the right thing to do. For both of them—and not just to rid me of my guilt.

After taking a shower and getting dressed, I reminded myself that nothing had really changed from last week to today. Sure, I’d seen Jesse again, but I was still a single mother, living with her parents, who needed a promotion to get her own place and raise her own child by herself.

That was what this was about, and that was my main focus as I went to his apartment like we’d agreed to when he’d brought me back to my hotel in a cab last night. My head was

pounding, but I hadn't brought any medication to Portland with me.

If Jenna had been here, I'd have been traveling with an entire drug store, but since I'd come alone, I'd neglected to bring along so much as a painkiller. Jesse might've stopped drinking, and while I didn't do it often, I'd had a few glasses of wine last night to take the edge off.

Whenever I'd found myself leaning into him too much, wanting him too much, or looking too deep into his eyes, I'd excused myself to go to the bar. It'd happened much too often for my lightweight self to keep up, and eventually, I'd been a little more tipsy than I'd been in years.

I was paying for it this morning, and as soon as he opened his door for me, he seemed to know it. "Hangover?"

"The worst one I've had in a long time." I groaned as I pulled off my sunglasses when I stepped into his too light apartment.

Actually, I was surprised by how much natural light there was in it. Having seen the building from the outside, I hadn't been expecting him to live in a dark cave or a basement, but I also hadn't been expecting it to feel so much like I wasn't even inside.

"Wow," I breathed as I stepped in and took a look around at the large, modern space. "This is a really nice place. It looks brand new."

"I bought it while they were renovating. I liked the minimalist style and all the natural light."

"Funny," I commented. "I was just thinking about all the natural light. Would it be too much for me to put my sunglasses back on?"

He laughed. "Have you taken anything for it?"

"Nope. I didn't bring anything with me."

"Hotels have usually got that kind of thing. You just need to call down to the front desk and they have someone run it up to you. I've got some painkillers if you'd like one."

“One? I want all of them. Please and thank you.”

He smirked, motioning for me to follow him as he turned and made his way down a long hallway. The apartment was much bigger than I’d thought it was, complete with three bedrooms each with their own bathroom, high ceilings, large windows everywhere, and a mini home-recording studio set up in what was supposed to have been the study.

All the rooms had the bare necessities of furniture in them and there was even some very abstract art on the walls. There were also framed, handwritten notes, and when I recognized the words written on some of the papers in them, I was struck dumb when I realized they must be the original drafts of some of the biggest hits he’d written—a lot of which were the biggest hits of the last decade.

I gaped when I found a heartbreak anthem that I’d listen to on repeat in my early twenties. “You wrote Bleed All Over?”

“Yep,” he said without turning around to look at me.

Once we reached what I assumed was the main bedroom—his bedroom—I paused at the door. “Is it okay if I come in?”

“Do you want the painkillers?”

“Yes.”

“Then come in.” He strode through the massive bedroom without stopping, but I nearly tripped over my own feet when I saw where he slept. And did other things.

I didn’t want to think about what other things he did in here, but considering what he’d said yesterday about discovering kinks, I knew this room probably saw plenty of action. Putting the thought out of my mind, I stared at the neatly made, modestly sized bed, and the sparse furnishings. There were even a few boxes standing in a corner.

“Did you just move in recently?”

His chuckle sounded from the bathroom. “Nope. I’ve been here for a couple of years.”

“Then why haven’t you unpacked?”

Without responding, he walked out of the bathroom and held out two white pills on his palm. As I took them from him, my fingertips brushed against his skin and my gaze flew to his. There was something guarded in it, but there was also a flash of heat that made the bed seem like it was much too close for comfort.

“Never mind,” I murmured. “Can I have some water?”

“Of course.” Taking a larger than necessary step around me, he led me back to his open-concept kitchen and handed me a bottle of water from the fridge before he waved me into a seat. “I don’t need that stuff. That’s why I haven’t unpacked it yet.”

“Oh. Why keep it, then?”

“Jesus, you ask a lot of questions,” he said after pausing for a beat. Then he took a deep breath before he shook his head. “It’s a good one, though. I don’t know why I’m keeping it. It’s a lot of my old stuff that I just haven’t even thought about in a while.”

“Oh.”

He motioned toward the pills in my hand. “Are you going to take those?”

Instead of answering, I popped the tablets into my mouth now that I’d remembered about them and washed them down with half the bottle of water. Jesse watched me do it, looking so delectable in another pair of jeans and a fitted white shirt today that my mouth dried up all over again once I’d swallowed the water.

I took another sip before clearing my throat. “How did you sleep?”

Those green eyes bored into mine as he shrugged his broad shoulders. “Fitfully. You?”

“I’m not sure that I slept as much as that I just passed out. Why did you sleep fitfully?”

He held my gaze intently. “I had a lot to think about, and I ended up thinking about a lot that I didn’t have to think

about.”

“I have a feeling I should stop asking questions now.” My voice was slightly on the husky side now, but the look in his eyes told me that if I kept asking questions, I was going to get answers I didn’t want to hear.

Answers that would lead us right back to his bedroom and allow me to find out what else he got up to in that bed. Deliberately averting my gaze, I swiped my tongue across my lips and ordered my body to calm the hell down.

I was still worked up after the dancing last night. That was all this was about.

That’s a lie.

It was a lie, but I was going to keep telling it to myself until I believed it. “We should talk about work now.”

My voice was still husky when I said it, but at least I’d gotten the appropriate words out. Jesse nodded curtly, motioning for me to go ahead. “I’m all ears. Max was pretty vague on the phone. I have no idea what he wants from me.”

“He wants you to come work for us.” I watched him so carefully that I saw the surprise in his eyes when he registered what I was saying. Since he didn’t shoot me down right off the bat, I kept going. “Gravity is an incredible company to work with. They’re willing to offer you a salary and you’d get royalties. You could keep working with the clients you’ve got now, but we’d also bring more clients to you.”

Eyes locked on mine, he lifted his chin just a fraction of an inch. “I’d have to move to New York?”

“Ideally, yes. If that’s a real point of contention for you, I’m sure we could work something out. Since it’s you I’m talking to, I’ll give it to you straight. Max Astor wants you on staff, working exclusively for us, or at least *through us*, with your existing clients, and he wants you bad enough that he’ll probably agree to any reasonable demands you make. What do you think?”

“I think we can keep talking about it. Honestly, I’m not sure what I’m going to do yet. Maybe another night out will

help me decide.”

I rolled my eyes, but I agreed anyway. Another night out meant spending more time with him as well as improving my chances at getting a promotion when I got home. It was a win-win in every way—except that the more time I spent with him, the more I wanted him.

Unfortunately, I had a feeling he wanted me too. And that posed a problem. A very real, very problematic problem. One that seemed to have only one solution—to get Jesse Slone out of my system for good, and this time, to keep him out of it.

After pitching me this morning, Rainey and I had gone to breakfast and then she'd headed back to her hotel to sleep. I'd gone home to think about Gravity's proposal, but I'd ended up writing almost all day.

The songs that came out of me were sweeter than the ones I was known for writing. If I didn't know any better, I'd have said that they seemed almost hopeful. Optimistic.

Rosie would go nuts over them, though. So at least there was that. If I wanted to, I bet I could even start a bidding war for these kind of songs between her and another of my clients who was always asking for something more positive.

I gathered up my notes once it was time for me to grab a shower before I went out to dinner with her. I stashed them in the studio and went to my room. Rainey had only been back in my life for twenty-four hours and she was already consuming my every thought.

Last night, I'd barely slept at all, and when I had managed it, it'd been every bit as fitful as I'd told her it'd been. The reason for it was simple—it was her. I'd spent half the night replaying every memory I had about our time together, the next quarter of it trying to resist jerking off because of those memories, and the rest of the time losing that particular fight.

As I stood under the warm water spray in my shower, my dick was back to full attention, clearly not caring about all the attention it'd gotten in the early hours of this morning. I

sighed, gritting my teeth against my baser urges as I tried to concentrate on anything other than her.

It didn't work. Every time I blinked, I saw those bright blue eyes. Every time I breathed, I missed inhaling her scent with the oxygen I needed.

While we'd only been together for a few months and friends for less than a year, she'd become ingrained in me. She was a part of me that I'd thought I'd cut out a long time ago, but it turned out I'd been wrong about that.

Growing up the way I had, I hadn't let many people close to me. I'd been friends with some of the kids in the trailer park, but being poor didn't always mean having a bad home situation. I'd been poor and I'd had a terrible home situation, and so I'd withdrawn even from them.

Since I wasn't an extrovert, it'd never bothered me much to be alone. Then Rainey had come along, and she'd lit up my entire life. A ray of sunshine in the darkness that'd given me hope for a better life. In many ways, I owed it to her that I'd gotten that better life.

Not only because she'd left me, but also because she'd given me that hope before she had. While I'd been thinking it over last night, I'd realized that was why I wasn't as angry with her anymore. She'd left me, but she'd given me so much before she had that the leaving didn't really matter as much as the rest of it.

As soon as I could, I got out of the shower and covered up before my cock got any more ideas about what we could do to pass the time. There wasn't much time left before I had to meet up with her anyway.

Once I was dressed and ready, I headed to the restaurant I'd asked her to meet me at. It was a low-key place that offered plenty of privacy during the dinner service, but once the kitchen closed, the sliding doors that formed the private dining rooms opened and got turned into a dance floor. I thought Rainey might like that.

She walked in a few minutes after I did, looking ravishing in a bold red dress that revealed her full cleavage and clung to her curvy hips. A second after I saw her, my cock was rock hard and begging for her again.

Ignoring it as best I could, I got up and brushed a kiss to her cheek before pulling her chair out for her. Surprise flickered in her eyes as she glanced into mine while she sat down. “Look at you, being all gentleman-like. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Considering the obvious bulge in my pants, we both knew that it wasn't the only pleasure I wanted to give her, but for now, the pleasure of her company, it would have to be. I smiled back at her as I went to take my seat.

“You might be an agent, but you're still a lady. You deserved to be treated right.”

“Does being an agent have anything to do with me being a lady?” she asked jokingly. “Or did you say it that way because all agents are supposed to be slippery sharks who ensnare you in our nets and trick you into paying us more money than we're worth?”

“Was that supposed to be a metaphor?” I teased. “Or is your mouth just running away with you again?”

The tops of her cheeks turned that pretty rose color I liked seeing on her so much, and it told me what I needed to know before she even voiced her thoughts. “My mouth was running away with me again, but let's get real. Do you really blame me for it?”

“For your mouth running away with you? No, not really. Is it still because this is weird for you, though?”

“It's not weird for you anymore?”

“Same answer. No, not really. I'm having a good time catching up with you. Just because it was unexpected doesn't make it bad.”

“Yes, but we're not supposed to be having a good time together. It's been years and there's all this stuff between us and yet...”

When she trailed off, I took the liberty of finishing her sentence for her. “And yet it still feels easy? It still feels natural?”

“Yes. Why is that? I don’t know how many relationships you’ve been in since I last saw you, but I haven’t been in many. Maybe that wouldn’t have been true if I’d met someone else I could be like this with.”

“Like what?”

“Like me,” she said with exasperation in her tone. “No one else I’ve met has made me feel like I can just be myself with them. Just you. How is that possible when I haven’t seen you for so long?”

Looking right into her eyes, I gave her the only answer I had. “It’s always been this way between us. Now that the awkward stage of being reunited after so long is over, why wouldn’t it be just the way it used to be between us? We click. I don’t know why. On paper, we really shouldn’t and yet we always have. Why fight it?”

“Because it’s not as simple as you’re making it sound,” she said matter-of-factly. “It can’t be as simple as you’re making it sound.”

“Why not? Because it is that simple. We get along well.”

She was quiet for a long moment, her gaze drinking in mine before she let out a soft sigh and smiled. “We do get along well. You’re right. We always have. It just doesn’t happen every day. At least, it doesn’t happen every day for me.”

“It doesn’t happen every day for me either,” I agreed, raising my soda to hers when the waiter delivered our drinks. “No wine for you tonight?”

Her eyes widened as she shook her head. “After last night? No way. I’m not touching alcohol again for a few months now that I’ve remembered how mean it is the next day.”

“Is it safe to assume that you never turned into a heavy partier, then?”

A soft smile broke out across her lips as she shook her head. “No, I didn’t. I’ve been to my fair share of parties, but the people who attend them aren’t really big drinkers. Did you turn into a heavy partier? Is that why you stopped drinking?”

Honesty time, then. “That was a part of it. I hit the booze too hard for a while, but then I woke up one morning with a massive hangover and I just had to ask myself why. I haven’t taken another sip of alcohol since.”

With my family history, I couldn’t afford to get sucked into the habit of regular drinking. As it had been, it’d been hard for me to stop when I should’ve. “It’s easier for me not to drink at all than to keep worrying about whether I’m drinking too much or too often.”

I’d never spoken to her about my dad’s problem, and she didn’t ask about it now. Back in the day, it hadn’t been a secret that my home life wasn’t great, though. Whenever she asked about coming over to my place, I’d told her I’d meet her at hers instead. If she asked questions about my parents, I gave her vague answers.

Eventually, she’d told me she was ready to listen when I was ready to tell her, and then she’d stopped asking. She didn’t ask now, either. Instead, she simply nodded like she understood that the drinking thing was a part of that and that I’d tell her about it if I was ever ready.

“How are your parents?” I asked, wondering if they still played as big a role in her life as they used to.

She smiled again, then rolled her eyes. “My parents are my parents. To be honest, they haven’t changed much and I don’t think they ever will. My dad still works really hard and he’s always at the office. I’ve asked him about retiring, but he treats it like a cuss word.”

I chuckled. “Some things never change. How about your mom?”

“She’s also one of those things that will never change. Don’t get me wrong, she’s an angel in disguise and she helps

me so much in so many ways, but to her mind, I'm still nine instead of twenty-nine."

"At least you know she loves you," I said earnestly. "She may be overbearing, but you know it comes from a good place."

"It does," she agreed. "Enough about them, though. Tell me about living in Portland. Why did you choose to come here after school?"

While I was light on the details, I gave her the highlights of my journey here, and she told me a bit more about New York while we ate. We kept our conversation light for the rest of the evening, steering clear of any topic involving our families or my upbringing.

Rainey laughed a lot, and every time she did, it was like the room got just a little bit brighter. More songs were already swimming around in my head, but when she asked if she could come up when we got back to my place, I nodded anyway.

Spending time with her trumped writing. For now anyway.

When we reached my kitchen, I turned to ask if she wanted a drink and found her much closer to me than I thought she'd be. Giggling when she saw my surprise, she shrugged. "I was just following you. You stopped very suddenly. Just be glad I didn't crash into you."

I held her gaze, moving one small step closer to her while I spoke. "I wouldn't have minded you crashing into me."

Eyes still on mine, she took one small step closer to me in turn. "Is that so?"

"Yep." Another step. "I've never minded having you close to me."

"That was a long time ago." As if she was as drawn to me as I was to her, she moved forward another few inches.

So close now that my chest would be touching hers soon if I took one more step, I shrugged, ducking my head to be on her eye level. "It was a long time ago, but it's also true now."

Without breaking eye contact, she lowered her head slowly to one side, those bright blues searching mine as she lowered her voice. “We shouldn’t do this.”

We weren’t doing anything, but I didn’t bother pointing that out to her because I knew she was talking about what we were about to do. “Why not?”

“I…” She trailed off, her lips parting before her tongue came out to swipe across them.

A soft groan tore out of me when I followed the movement, remembering what that pretty pink tongue used to feel like on my skin. Gaze clouding over, she blinked a few times before she finished her sentence. “I don’t know. It just felt like something I should say.”

“Do you want to?”

After only hesitating for a second, she dropped her chin in a tiny, barely perceptible nod. “I do.”

“Good. So do I.” Without wasting any more time, I closed the final bit of distance between us and took her face between my hands.

She glanced up at me, tilting her head back and pushing up on her toes as we surged together. My mouth slanted over hers, and the second our lips fused, it felt like no time had passed at all. Except now, we weren’t teenagers hurriedly groping in whatever space was private and available.

We were adults. Alone. With a whole night ahead of us.

Fuck yeah.

Jesse's strong arms wrapped around my waist, hauling me closer until I could feel his heart pounding against my chest. Since he towered over me even in my heels, I looped my arms around his neck and hung onto him as my knees went weak.

Hungrily devouring my mouth, he lifted me against him and slid his hands under my thighs, quickly turning and walking us back before setting me down on his kitchen counter. I wound my legs around his hips and tightened my arms around his neck, making sure he stayed as close to me as I could get him.

Kissing Jesse Slone was transcendental. It took me to a place I never thought I'd go again. A place where anything was possible. Where we could be together and had wings of our own. A place where we could soar through the sky and touch the clouds. Dance among the stars. Make love on the moon.

It just absolutely blew my mind that he could make me feel this way with something as simple as a kiss. I knew that this was a bad idea, but I didn't care. In that moment, as Jesse's heart raced along with mine and his hard body pressed up against me, with his hands on my face and in my hair, and with his mouth sealed over mine, it didn't feel like a bad idea. It just felt right.

Giving in without putting up much of a fight, I reached for the sides of his leather jacket and pushed them off his

shoulders, a thrill traveling through me when I heard the rustle of the fabric as it dropped to the floor. I reached for the hem of his shirt next, and he helped me by raising his arms and putting a fraction of space between us so I could get it off.

Once it was gone, I placed my palms on his bare chest and moaned as the heat of his skin seared into me. His heart was going wild, but then again, so was mine.

All I got before his mouth crashed back into mine was a hooded, intense look, and then he was back on me, kissing me like he wouldn't ever stop. I leaned into him, my nipples so hard that they were aching and an inferno brewing in my panties.

Just as I started wondering if he was ever going to touch me or make a move to take my clothes off, he wrenched his mouth away from mine and lifted me up off the counter again. So surprised that I yelped, I held on to him for dear life as he suddenly carried me down the hall.

“Where are we going?”

He looked right at me instead of checking where we were going, but we didn't crash into anything. “If we're doing this, it's not going to be some quick fuck in the kitchen. I feel like I've been waiting my whole life to be able to take my time with you and do it properly.”

“To the bedroom, then?”

He nodded, the barest hint of a smirk touching those beautiful lips as we crossed the threshold to his room. “For starters, yes. I'm thinking after that, we could probably move to the shower. Then maybe the floor. Up against the wall. I haven't quite decided yet.”

My entire body exploded with heat and a soft moan fell from my lips. “Jesse...”

“I got you,” he murmured reassuringly before gently lowering me to his bed. He didn't rush through undressing me, but he also didn't make me wait.

Eyes only leaving mine to stare at my body as it was revealed to him, he made me feel like the only girl in the

world. The only thing in the world, even. It was almost like he couldn't and didn't want to see anything else.

My quiet sighs and soft moans were punctuated only by the sound of his deep groans as he shed my clothes. Once I was naked, his lips trailed over every inch of me, caressing me as he made his way down and then pushed my thighs apart rougher than I was anticipating.

I didn't stop him, though. I wanted him too much to talk. To breathe. So instead, I kept my legs where he'd put them and ran my fingers through his hair, crying out when his hot mouth sealed over my most private part.

He kissed me as hungrily there as he had my mouth earlier, and in no time at all, I was shaking and whimpering, right at the very edge. When he pushed a finger into me and hooked it to stroke someplace I'd never been touched before, I was gone.

Just *gone*.

I left this plane of existence and skyrocketed to a place of exquisite pleasure, my toes curling as I rode out the most powerful orgasm I'd ever had. He saw me through it and brought me down gently, crawling back up to kiss me when I finally returned to earth.

"You okay?" he asked, and strangely, I swore I saw confusion and worry in his eyes instead of lust.

I frowned instantly, wondering what the hell had gone wrong. "I'm better than ever. Why? Did I do something wrong?"

His eyes flew wide open. "No." Pausing to exhale slowly, he pushed a lock of damp hair off my forehead and stared deep into my eyes. "I was just afraid I might've hurt you."

"Hurt me? No. You definitely didn't hurt me. Why would you even think that?"

"Because you feel..." His head shook, the confusion swirling in his eyes as he cocked his head at me. "If I didn't know better, I'd have thought you were a virgin."

“Oh. Right. I, uh...” I breathed in and out before I made the admission he already knew to be true. “It’s just been a long time.”

“We’ll take it slowly,” he promised. “That’s if you even want to—”

“I want to.” I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him down, not even minding my own taste on his lips as I kissed him.

We didn’t talk much again after that, but he took things as slowly as he’d said he would, looking at me with every move he made to check that I was still okay. With him moving inside me and only a condom between us, I cataloged every inch of his face, taking mental notes of the things I did to put that mask of tortured pleasure on his features.

By the time he finally let go, I’d lost count of the orgasms he’d given me. Although I knew I would be sore in the morning, he really had made sure that I was as ready as I was ever going to get. Watching him find his release was the sexiest thing I’d ever seen, and the sight alone triggered another climax that shook me to the core.

After, I lay with my head on Jesse’s chest, listening to his heartbeat as it slowed. Stroking along the hard lines of his abdomen, I glanced up at his face, smiling as I took in his handsome profile and the relaxed expression he was wearing. His eyes were closed, but I could tell he wasn’t sleeping.

“I’ve missed this,” I murmured, inhaling the musky, masculine scent of him before letting my own lids fall shut. “Like, seriously missed this. The last thing in the world I want to do right now is get up, but I guess I have to get going.”

“Nah,” he replied lazily, without even opening his eyes but tightening his grip on me all the same. “Stay the night. You don’t have to go anywhere.”

I sighed, smiling sadly as I sat up before bending over to plant a chaste kiss right on his lips. “Thanks, but I do have to go.”

“Why?” His eyes finally opened just before I pulled away, and he wrapped his hand around the nape of my neck, keeping me hovering just a few inches above his face. “You really are welcome to stay. I’ll even make you breakfast in the morning.”

“Make me breakfast?”

He pursed his lips, a playful glint in his eyes as he blew out a defeated breath through his nostrils. “Fine. You caught me. I won’t be making it, but I can order it in. What do you like to eat these days, pancakes still?”

“Yes, but I really can’t stay. It wouldn’t be very professional to have a sleepover with the talent I’m supposed to be recruiting.”

One of his brows arched as he lifted a hand to motion at us. “But being naked and sweaty in bed with the talent you’re supposed to be recruiting is professional?”

I winked before I wriggled out of his grip and swung my legs off the side of the bed, glancing back at him over my shoulder. “Well, I’m willing to do whatever it takes to get you to sign on.”

He laughed softly, his stomach rippling with movement as he looked back at me and hooked an arm behind his head. “Maybe cuddling is what it’s going to take to get me to sign on. You never know, but I think that you should play it safe and come back to me.”

Lying on his bed stark naked and in that pose, he was so painfully sexy that I very nearly took him up on his offer. I wanted nothing more than to crawl back into bed with the man and to stay there till kingdom came, but I couldn’t.

This was too much, too fast for me right now. I’d just had sex for the first time in twelve—almost thirteen—years, and I’d had it with the same guy I’d had it with back then. The guy who had also impregnated me and didn’t know about it.

It was a lot to process, especially because it definitely hadn’t just been physical for me. The emotional connection I felt with him was crazy intense, but soon enough, I was going

back to reality. Back to New York, where I lived with my parents and our daughter.

If I stayed the night with him and woke up in his arms, made breakfast with him, and even just took a shower here, I'd start believing that this was real. That this could be my life. Not necessarily here in Portland, but with him.

It'd be too domestic. Too much like the kind of scenes I used to dream about for us in the future. I needed to get my head on straight and accept this for what it was—a one-time thing to get closure on what had been left unfinished with us.

“Thanks again,” I said as I got up and started hunting down my clothes. “It’s sweet of you to offer, but I should go.”

Instead of arguing, he heaved out a sigh and nodded, then got up and walked me out when I was ready. “Being sweet is yet another thing I’ve never been accused of. I wasn’t being sweet, Rainey. I was serious. You’re welcome to stay, but you’re also free to leave.”

“Thank you.” When we reached the door, I turned back and gave him one last hug. “I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

“Okay.” He hugged me back, letting our hug linger until I finally convinced myself to let him go. Pressing a kiss to my forehead when I finally started pulling away, he took a step back and gave me a wave. “Sleep tight, baby. See you tomorrow.”

Everything in me melted at the sight of the affection and understanding in his eyes when he looked back at me. Jesse knew me well enough to know that leaving had nothing to do with professionalism, but he was letting me go anyway.

As I went downstairs and hailed a cab, I knew that leaving was the right thing to do, but I also wished that I didn’t have to. That maybe one day, I’d finally be able to stay.

Some kind of buzzing woke me up the next morning. Groggy and immediately pissed off, I shot up in bed when it didn't stop, groaning when I checked my watch and saw that it wasn't even seven a.m. yet. *Who the hell would wake me up at this ungodly hour?*

After Rainey had left, I hadn't been able to fall asleep, so I'd stayed up writing until just a few hours ago. As the buzzing continued, I realized it was my intercom and I scowled. No one usually came by my place except for Callum, and he knew I wasn't human until at least nine.

Grunting when the intercom sounded again, I got out of bed and stomped to my front door, but when I saw who was downstairs, my bad mood vanished. Rainey's beautiful face was staring right at the camera at the entrance, and she looked mighty determined about something.

As the anger and annoyance fled from my system, they were replaced by excitement and hope. And okay, a very intense lust, too. Suddenly horny as hell all over again, I let her in and went to unlock the door, then waited for her to come up.

She was wearing another pencil skirt and flowing blouse, but her hair was up today and it was secured in a bun with a pencil. All sorts of fantasies of what I could do to her while she had her corporate look going on swarmed around in my mind while I waited for her, but as soon as I saw the folder she

was carrying when she came around the corner from the elevator, I realized she wasn't here for another round.

Then it got worse.

When her blue eyes met mine, she hadn't even said a word yet but I already knew she was leaving. It was Monday, and although I'd known that she'd have to go back to New York sooner or later, I'd been hoping for more than just two days with her.

Something inside me died, but I straightened to my full height and crossed my arms over my chest as I waited for her to tell me that my suspicions were correct. On the plus side, at least she'd come here to tell me she was leaving this time.

It was a lot better than having her just disappear again. She came to a standstill in front of me, but shook her head when I moved aside to wave her in.

"This will only take a minute," she said, then held out the folder to me. "In there, you'll find a comprehensive written offer from Gravity. Look it over. Maybe have your lawyer take a look at it, too. Like I told you before, Max really wants you. If there's anything else you'd like, you only need to ask. As long as it's not an unreasonable request, I'm sure he'll agree to it."

I took the folder without looking away from her. "You're leaving Portland, then."

It wasn't a question, but she nodded anyway. "I'm going back to New York this morning."

"So soon?" I tried to filter all the bad shit out of my voice when I said it, but her expression softened like she knew exactly what I was feeling regardless.

"This isn't the same as it was last time, Jesse. You know that my life is in New York. I need to get back there. It's been fun being here with you, but I don't live here. I don't work here. It's time for me to go home."

"Already?" I released my arms to scrub my hands over my face, doing it multiple times, but it didn't help to clear my head at all. "The way I understood Max, he said that he was

sending an agent out to recruit me and that said agent would be here as long as I needed them to be to hammer out a deal.”

She swallowed, but I saw the earnestness in her eyes when she answered the question I hadn't asked. “I'm supposed to stay here until I get an answer from you. Ideally, I'm supposed to get a yes and then stay here until you've signed the contract and we've arranged your move, but I can't do that.”

My heart did a weird clench-flop thing. “Why not?”

To her credit, she didn't avert her gaze or lie to me. She looked right at me and told me the truth. “I'm leaving because I can't do this with you again, Jesse. It hurt too much the last time and I know it's only been two days, but with you? There's just too much history. It's too complicated. It's bringing up too many things I shouldn't be digging up.”

“So to clarify, you're running because you're afraid of getting hurt?”

She didn't do anything but stare at me for a long minute. Then she dipped her head in another nod that quickly turned into a shake. “I am afraid of getting hurt, but it's not only about me. I'm also afraid of hurting you, and if that happens, I have no hope of you signing on with us. This was supposed to be a simple recruitment trip, but it was naïve of me to think that was all it would be.”

“What if I'm not afraid of getting hurt?” *Lies. Lies. Lies.*

I'd been hurting since I'd realized she was leaving again, but I wasn't capable of just letting her go. I had to try. The disbelief shining from her eyes told me she knew I was lying, but she didn't call me out on it.

“You may not be afraid of getting hurt, but I am. I really can't do this with you again. I need to get back to my real life before I get so wrapped up in fantasyland with you that I forget that we're not those two kids anymore. We've both got lives. We've got responsibilities, and you've got a big decision to make. Max made a good offer. There are lots of perks. Call him if you have any questions.”

When she started turning to leave, I scoffed loudly. “Wait, that’s it? You’re just going to tell me to call your boss and then go?”

“Yes,” she said, but at least she was facing me again. I hated the flicker of hopelessness in her eyes, but I didn’t understand why it was there.

“What’s really going on here, Rainey?”

“I told you. I can’t go down this path with you again where everything feels so easy when it’s really not. I can’t banter, and flirt, and have sex with you like it doesn’t mean anything. It’s just not me, but when I’m with you, it’s like I can’t help myself. I might be throwing away my promotion by going, but at least I’ll be keeping my sanity intact.”

“Who said it didn’t mean anything?” I asked, reaching for her but dropping my hands back to my sides when she took a small step back. “Look, just come in and we can talk about it. You don’t need to throw your promotion away and just leave. I haven’t said no. I haven’t even looked at the damn offer.”

“Sure, but I’m not about to sit here and convince you to take it. You can look at it whether I’m here or not.”

“Yeah, but I’d rather look at it with you.”

She sighed, resignation taking the place of the hopelessness. “I’d rather you didn’t. I’m sorry, Jesse. I thought I could come here and be professional. I thought I could treat you like I would any other client, but I obviously can’t. I hate having to do this, but I need to go and you need to let me.”

“Fine.” My heart did another weird clench-constrict-skip thing when she started turning again, and the words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. “I want to see New York.”

Her brows shot up high as she spun back to me. “Excuse me?”

“I can’t give your boss a decision until I see where I would be going.”

“You’ve never been to New York?” she asked with a hint of incredulity in her voice.

“Sure, I’ve been there, but I’ve never looked at it from the perspective of someone who might be moving there. I’d like to see it before I commit to uprooting my life and taking it there.”

She searched my gaze for a long time before she finally nodded. “Okay, I’ll let Max know that we need to organize a trip. Goodbye, Jesse. You’ll be hearing from my office real soon.”

From her office, not from her. *Message received, Rainey. Message received.*

Just because I’d received it didn’t mean I was going to let her go without a fight, though. Once upon a time, I hadn’t been given the opportunity to fight for her. It was different this time, though. When she turned around again, I let her go like she’d asked me to do, conceding the battle in favor of winning the war.

After she was long gone, I got dressed and headed to Callum’s house. My friend was surprised to see me so early, but he stuck a mug of strong coffee in my hand and sat me down, waiting expectantly for me to tell him what had happened.

I was as surprised as he was when I came clean, telling him all about Rainey and what had happened to her. When I got to the part about going to New York soon, he put up his hand to stop me for the first time since I’d started talking.

“Hang on. Back up. You’re going to New York?”

“Looks like it,” I said. “I told her I needed to go before I could tell them whether I was accepting their offer.”

Callum cocked a knowing brow at me. “You’re really considering moving there, then?”

“No, but it gets me more time with her if I stall for a while. Plus, I get a trip and more wining and dining out of the deal. Obviously, I’m going to take it all.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing, bro.”

Yeah, so do I. The truth was that I didn't know what I was doing. In fact, I had no idea what I was getting myself into, but at the time, it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that the universe had brought Rainey Hollenbeck back into my life, and I refused to just let her disappear all over again.

In the five hours I spent on the plane home, my emotions ran wild. I went from being devastated about leaving him behind again to being elated about seeing my girl. From being depressed to being excited. From being bummed about the promotion to hopeful that he'd take the job and I'd get it after all.

Just before the flight landed, I got up and headed to the bathroom. In the tiny cubicle, I splashed some water on my face before drying it and reapplying my makeup. When I was sure that my mother and Jenna wouldn't be able to tell that I'd been crying when they picked me up, I went back to my seat.

It was time to put Jesse behind me again. For a brief moment in time, we'd been reunited and everything had been just the way I'd once thought it would be when we grew up. But in the end, it'd been nothing more than a moment in time.

I'd meant what I said to him this morning. It'd taken me all night last night to realize that I couldn't stay there like I'd been told to do. My connection with Jesse was too strong. The thought sounded stupid even in my own head, but that didn't make it any less true.

Staying in Portland with him would've been asking for trouble I couldn't afford. The fact that it'd already been so difficult to leave him after only just two days had reaffirmed my decision to go. That man was too dangerous for me to be around.

All those old feelings had resurfaced far too strong. There was too much he didn't know and he was too much of a wildcard for me to just come out and tell him.

While it sucked that it felt like my heart was breaking again just a little bit, I refused to hurt our daughter. I would protect her heart at all costs—even if the cost was my own. Maybe it wasn't fair to either of them, but he lived in Portland and she lived in New York.

He still hadn't opened up to me about his past, but it was clear that he hadn't been able to let it go. The mystery thing was one thing to me, but it would be another with her. All I knew about his childhood was that it couldn't have been good.

I had no idea how he'd take the news that he had a daughter and I had no idea how he'd want to raise her. If he'd want to be involved in her life and, if so, to what extent. We'd never talked about having kids. We'd been too young. It'd felt too far away.

Irrespective of the things he made me feel, how protected and how safe, it was too much of a gamble to just sit him down and give it to him straight. Until I knew more about him and what his life was like now outside of writing and being good, I couldn't risk it.

Not for me. Not for him. And especially not for Jenna.

As I rolled my wheeled suitcase behind me and spotted her and my mother in the crowd, my decision was solidified. Seeing the innocent, brilliant smile on her face was all I needed to know that I couldn't afford to have him play fast and loose with her emotions. The older she'd gotten, the more she'd asked about her father.

She definitely had her hangups about her paternity, but hangups were better than disappointment or, even worse, outright rejection. When my mother's gaze landed on mine, her eyes narrowed and I quickly schooled my features, determined not to let her know how I was feeling.

"Hey, baby," I squealed, letting go of my suitcase to pull my daughter into my arms and kiss the top of her head as

many times as she would let me. “How are you? Oh, I missed you so much. So, so much.”

“I missed you too,” she murmured, her arms around me so tight that I could barely breathe, but I wouldn’t have had it any other way. “How did it go, Mom? You don’t have to go back, do you?”

“No, honey. I’m not going back.” Not in any sense of the word. “The client wants to come here to see New York before he gives us an answer, but that’s it. Either the city will convince him or it won’t, but I’ve done my job.”

“Good.” She finally released me and I turned to my mother to give her a hug, too. Hers was far more guarded than Jenna’s had been, and she kept looking at me like she knew something was going on. *Damn her and her spidey senses.*

“How was the rest of your trip?” Jenna asked once we were in the car and on our way home. “Do you still want to take me there some day?”

“I’d love to,” I said enthusiastically, choosing to ignore my mother’s contemplative expression. “It’s a great place. Beautiful. Vibrant. It’s got this energy to it that’s so different to what it’s like here.”

“Calm down, Rainey,” Mom warned. “It’s not like you’re moving there.”

“No, but it’s a great place to visit. I really enjoyed my time there and Jenna asked what my trip was like. That’s all.”

Mom harrumphed, but her attention went back to the road while Jenna and I spoke about Portland. As we were nearing the house, she leaned as far forward as the seatbelt at the back would allow her to and looked at me imploringly.

“So the client is coming here?”

“Potential client, and yes. At some point, he’ll be visiting and then he’ll tell us if he’s accepting my boss’s offer.”

“I want to meet him when he’s here,” she said immediately, and my stomach plummeted to the ground.

If I refused too fast or too vehemently, my mother would definitely be even more sure that something was going on, though. Since I couldn't allow that to happen, I smiled at Jenna and kept my tone light.

“We'll see. He's probably going to be pretty busy. I'm sure Max is going to pull out all the stops for the visit.”

“I love meeting your clients, though. They're so cool.”

“Oh, they're so cool, are they?” I teased. “What about your dear old mother who signed them all? Am I at least a little bit cool, too?”

She giggled. “Maybe a little bit.”

I laughed but left it at that. Having my preteen tell me that I was a little bit cool was as much as I could expect from her in any one day. I took the compliment and changed the subject to school. She filled me in on her day until we got home, but my things were barely out of the car before my mom jerked her head toward the kitchen.

“Rainey, honey, I need your help with seasoning the chicken.” She glanced at Jenna. “You go do your homework, dear. Mom will be with you in a minute.”

My daughter's face fell and I ground my teeth together. Having her order us around was just one of the reasons why it was time for us to get our own place. The only problem was that I didn't know if she'd let us leave even once I could afford the house I'd been saving for.

Soon after I'd started working, I'd gone to look at an apartment, and while it hadn't been perfect, it was within my budget. I'd told my parents that Jenna and I would finally be getting off their backs, but Mom insisted on going to see the place first.

When she had, she'd made it seem like a complete dump where one couldn't possibly raise a child. And so we'd stayed. Over the years, I'd gone to look at a few more places, but every time she saw them, she'd done the same thing.

Eventually, I'd stopped looking but I'd been saving all the money I would have been paying for rent. Over and above the

amount I paid them, anyway. I'd offered to pay them the difference as well, but Mom had told me to save it instead.

I didn't know if I'd ever have enough money for a place she'd approve of, but we really needed to get out of here. My heart crumbled when Jenna shot me a pleading look, but I'd long since stopped arguing with my mother in front of her.

"Go on, baby," I said through clenched teeth. "I'll be there in minute. How about when you're done with your homework, we go for a walk and get a milkshake?"

She perked up, but my mother's lips pursed in disapproval. Once Jenna was gone and we were in the kitchen alone, she finally voiced her concerns. "Buying her a milkshake so late in the day is asking for trouble, young lady. It's too much sugar and it'll ruin her dinner."

"Mom." I gave her a warning of my own. "I'm not going to justify my decision to you. You don't have to approve, but I'm taking my daughter for a milkshake once we're done here. What did you want to talk to me about aside from my horrible parenting?"

"I didn't say you were a horrible—" She cut herself off, pinched the bridge of her nose, and then looked back up at me. "What happened on your trip?"

"What do you mean? You heard all about it in the car."

Accusations darkened her eyes. "No, I didn't hear all about it. I heard the parts you wanted me to hear. There's something off about it. Something you're not telling us. What is it?"

"It's nothing, Mom. It was a work trip. There's just not much more to say." We were interrupted by the ringing of my phone, and I showed her the screen after sliding the device out of my back pocket. "It's my boss. I need to take this. He's going to want an update about the client."

"Go right ahead," she said as she made herself comfortable, obviously intending to listen in on the call and not even trying to hide it.

Exasperation rolled through me like a wave, but I didn't leave the kitchen. If she was intent on listening in, she could.

Since I wasn't about to tell him about what had really happened in Portland, I had nothing to say to Max that I couldn't say in front of her.

"Rainey," he said cheerfully when I picked up. "I just got your email. It went well, then?"

"It sure did." I turned on the fake excitement for the benefit of both of them. "He's definitely very interested. From the sounds of things, his only reservation is in moving here. That's why he wants to see New York."

"Fantastic job, Rainey. Really fantastic. If his only hesitation is because of having to move, then we've basically got him in the bag. I was surprised when I heard you were coming home already, but obviously, you really didn't waste any time."

Mom listened closely to the praises. The phone wasn't on speaker, but I knew she could still hear a good deal of what he was saying in the silence of the kitchen. I ducked my head to roll my eyes without her seeing it, and while I did that, Max was still going on at the other end of the line.

"We'll organize everything for a seamless trip. All you'll have to do when he gets here is to show him around and let the city sell itself. I love Portland, but come on. This is New York. It's the big time. The city that never sleeps. Everybody knows that."

"All I'll have to do?" I echoed, latching onto that part of the sentence because no, I would not be showing him around. "I thought you might want to take the lead when he arrives, sir."

"Oh no, darling. Obviously, you've got him on the hook. I'll meet with him, but he's all yours. I'll let you know when he's going to be getting here. Again, you did a fantastic job. Thank you, Rainey. We'll see you back at the office tomorrow."

He hung up before I could say no or make a case for why someone else should show him around. My mother watched

me closely as I set the phone down on the counter, but she didn't say anything as I realized my plan had failed.

I had managed to leave Jesse. It had taken everything I had to walk away from him so soon after seeing him again, and now, my boss was bringing him to me.

Fuck. Well, that didn't go as planned.

Callum's ranch was one of my favorite places to go. I loved my apartment, but when I was here, I felt like I could breathe.

My friend was outside when I arrived, sitting with his ass in the dirt while he mended a fence at his paddock. When he heard me approaching, he shot me a sour look before he turned back to the fence.

"I'm starting to think I should sell this place." He whacked a hammer into a nail and cursed when he nearly hit his thumb. "All this maintenance is going to kill me."

"Welcome to home ownership, bro. It's all maintenance, all the time."

He rolled his eyes at me. "You own your place, and I never see you doing any maintenance."

"Yeah, but that's because I have a facilities manager to call when anything breaks. There's an apartment opening up down the hall from me at the end of the month if you want it. It comes with a surly neighbor but also, the facilities manager."

"Living in the city would suffocate me," he retorted, but then sighed and dropped the hammer in a puff of dust. "On the other hand, suffocation is better than being murdered by maintenance. I swear, when I die, my headstone is going to read *Here lies Callum, he fixed things.*"

I chuckled, then lifted my arms to my sides and dragged in a deep breath of fresh air. "If you keep talking like that, you

might put me off my plan of buying the place next to yours.”

He snorted. “What are you talking about, Mr. New York? The only place you’re going to be buying is a nice little condo in Manhattan.”

“I told you, I’m not moving there,” I said. “I’m only going to spend a few more days with Rainey. She and I still have some things to talk about. We could’ve had those conversations here, but before we did, she was gone.”

“Exactly. Gone back to her real life, that you’re now following her to.” He pushed up off the ground and led me into his house.

We walked straight to the kitchen and he tossed me a bottle of ice cold water before cracking one open himself and downing the whole thing in one go. Once he’d swallowed it all, he shook his head at me. “Look, I get that you’ve got history with this girl, but you need to be careful with her, man.”

“Why? There’s no need to be careful. We’ve just got a few things to sort out. A few loose ends I need to tie up.” I made a soaring motion through the air with my hand. “Move forward, you know? I can’t move forward if I’ve still got that old monkey on my back.”

“Up until a few days ago, I didn’t even know there was a monkey on your back. I mean, I suspected, but I took you at your glares and left well enough alone.”

“You’re supposed to take someone at their word, not their glares.”

He shrugged. “There were no words to take you by, man. All you ever did when I asked about it was to glare at me. I knew someone had to have done some damage to you, but this is the first time I’ve heard anything about it.”

“She didn’t do any damage to me.” I cracked the lid of my bottle of water. “If anything, her leaving freed me from a life of early-onset domesticity and eventual divorce.”

“If that’s what you want to tell yourself, then so be it. I’ve known you for a few years now, though. I think I’ve gotten to

know you pretty well, and I've never seen you like this about a woman. You're all... talkative and shit. Hell, I've never even seen you chatting someone up in a club. All I ever see is you giving a girl a look, and the next thing I know you're taking her home with you."

I smirked. "So I got game. Don't be a hater."

He scoffed. "I'm not a hater. I'm a realist. This girl was in town for what, two days? I didn't even get to meet her before she was gone again, and now you're chasing after her to the other side of the damn country."

"What about it?" I asked. "I'm only going so we can clear some stuff up and have a bit more time together before we close this chapter."

"To close a chapter, you need to be able to turn a page. You clearly haven't done that and it's been a damn decade. What makes you think a few more days is going to allow you to do it?"

"I haven't been able to get any answers in that decade. I'm going to be getting them in those few days. That's what makes me know—not think—that I can finally get some closure with my all-expenses-paid trip."

He scratched the short beard on his jaw, not looking convinced. "All I'm saying is that I think you should be careful with her. You don't know anything about her life now, but she does have a life. And it's in New York. She was only here to recruit you, so don't go getting any ideas about bringing her home, buying a ranch, and pumping a few babies into her."

I grimaced. "I definitely don't have any ideas about doing any of those things except for buying a ranch. What do you think, any of your neighbors wanting to sell anytime soon?"

"What I think is that we'll see if you come home from the Big Apple before I start asking around, that's what."

"I'm coming home," I insisted. "After I spend a few more days with the one who got away."

I really wasn't concerned about any of the stuff he was saying. Sure, I didn't know much about her life in New York other than what she did for a living, but I didn't care. I knew she liked me the way I liked her, and while I wasn't getting any fantastical ideas about getting her to quit her job and move across the country to be with me, there was something between us that was worth exploring.

"That girl's got her nails in you, man," Callum muttered as he looked at whatever expression was on my face. "Now come on, let's go get some nails in my fence instead. While you're still around, I might as well take advantage of you and make you help me with the never-ending maintenance. At the very least, it might discourage you from buying a fucking ranch. It's a mistake. I'm telling you that right now."

"And yet, you wouldn't leave here for all the money in the world," I said.

He shrugged. "Yeah, that may be true, but it's only because once you get a taste of it, you can never go back to confined living spaces."

As I looked around once we got outside, I had to agree with him. If I had a place like this, I'd never leave it again. I'd build myself a nice studio and I'd make all the artists who wanted me to work with them come to me.

The thought reminded me of the one thing apart from Rainey that made me curious about Gravity and New York. I'd be working for one company and they'd send me clients. It was the only thing that made the offer tempting.

The pile of money they were offering me was nothing more than a cherry on top. It was a big pile, though. A pile that would give me the financial security I'd been after all my life.

Maybe it was more than the cherry on top, but I didn't want to leave Portland. I loved it here and New York was too fast-paced for me. Too big. Too loud.

It was the city that never slept, but I happened to like sleeping. I didn't feel like I was missing out and I'd never felt an attraction to the bright lights.

Thankfully, Callum left me to my thoughts while I helped him mend the fence and do a few more things after that. When we got inside to grab some lunch, my phone rang and he gave me a curious look.

“Is it the future Mrs. Slone?”

I scoffed in response, but my body’s reaction to hearing that in reference to Rainey was insane. My heart swelled, my blood felt bubbly with unfamiliar giddiness, and my soul did a little happy dance while my cock threatened to jerk to attention.

Instead of letting on that he’d just put a great fucking idea in my brain, I shook my head. “Nah, it’s her boss.”

“You didn’t say she wasn’t the future Mrs. Slone,” he grumbled as I took the call.

“How are you, Max?” I said after pressing the phone to my ear.

The other man sounded just as jovial as he had before. “I’m doing great, Jesse. Especially since Rainey says you’re considering our offer. Is that right?”

“It sure is,” I said, not really sure if I was lying or not. “If you were based here, you’d have had the paperwork in your hand by now.”

He chuckled. “I hear you. Moving is a big decision. I’m glad you’re doing the sensible thing and coming out to see us instead of just turning us down outright.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Well, it’s good to hear that because we’ve made some arrangements for you. My assistant said you were available to come out immediately?”

“Yep. I can keep working from anywhere, so it’s not a problem.”

“Good. Good,” he said happily. “So we’ve got you on a flight tomorrow afternoon. We’ve provisionally made arrangements for you to stay for a week, but we’ll extend your visit if you’re still not convinced after that.”

I noticed that he said nothing about cutting my trip short if I decided against it in less than a week, but I didn't mention it. "Okay, that sounds good. I'll be on the plane tomorrow. Just send me the details."

"My assistant will have them to you soon, and we'll send a car again to pick you up from your plane. I'll see you soon, Jesse. You have a good day now."

"Thanks, Max. You too."

As I slid the phone back into my pocket, Callum gave his head a mournful shake and sighed. "I guess I'm going to have to look into hiring a facilities manager of my own. You sure as hell ain't going to be around for much longer."

I wanted to deny it, but I couldn't. Tomorrow afternoon, I would be on that plane, and while the trip had only been arranged for a week, I honestly didn't know how long it was going to be before I would be back.

“Max is summoning you to his office,” Rita called when I got off the video conference I’d been on for the last hour. “He said to tell you to get up there as soon as you can.”

“On my way.” I rolled my chair back and got up, smoothing out my skirt even though I knew it wasn’t wrinkled. Taking a deep breath, I headed out and up to the boss’s office.

I already knew he wanted to talk to me about Jesse’s visit. The last I’d heard, they were going to confirm the when of it with him and the rest would be up to me.

Since Max had said he’d let me know when the arrangements had been made, I was assuming I was about to find out when Jesse would be here. Max, in turn, was about to find out that I wasn’t up to showing him around.

I’d done some thinking. I’d tried to convince myself that it would be okay. I’d even tried telling myself that I’d overreacted back in Portland, but the truth was that I just didn’t foresee any scenario that forced the two of us to spend time together ending well for me.

“Rainey.” He welcomed me warmly when I walked into his office. Grinning as he motioned for me to take a seat, he gave my coffee order to his assistant from memory and then turned to me. “I’ve got some good news for you. Jesse Slone is landing in New York tomorrow afternoon. I was worried that he may back out on his promise to come, but I just got off the phone with him a little while ago and he’s all in.”

My lungs tightened a bit, but since this was what I'd been expecting, it didn't come as much of a surprise that Jesse was keeping his word. "That is good news. I've been giving it some thought, though, and I don't know if I'm the right person to sell him on moving here. I just don't know if I'm the right fit. Maybe Maddie—"

Max frowned at me as he placed his elbows on his desk. "Jesse Slone is your potential client, Rainey. I thought we were clear on that. If you bring him in, you're looking at a promotion. Are you really willing to throw that away?"

"Well, no sir. I could still manage him if he signs on. It's just that I'm not really big into the New York party scene. Jesse doesn't drink, but he's a young, single man. The kind of New York experience that might lure him here isn't really the New York I know. I doubt he's going to be captivated by farmer's markets and playgrounds."

Max's expression softened, but the determined glint in his eyes remained. "I hear your concerns, but they're hardly insurmountable. He's only going to be here for a week and you don't have to be with him twenty-four-seven. Just give him the names of places he can check out if you're not available and take him out a few nights."

He made it sound so simple, but it wasn't. "You're right, of course, sir. That being said, I really think that Maddie or any of the other more senior agents will be able to lock him in without any trouble at all. They're well versed in this side of the business and—"

"If you ever want to gain the experience they have, then you have to get that experience. The only way to do that, is to do it." He leaned back in his chair, gaze intent on mine. "Without that experience, you'll never be in a position to take on a more senior role. However, it's your career and your promotion. If you don't want to advance, I can't force you to do it. What's it going to be, Rainey?"

Shit. I'd been hoping that there would be a way to get out of showing him around and still get the promotion, but obviously, that wasn't going to happen. It was Jesse or bust.

Taking a beat to think it over, I nodded reluctantly. “I’ll do it. Of course, I will. I’ll give it my best shot and hope he lands on our side of the fence.”

“If he does, you can start packing up your office because you’ll be moving to a better one soon.” Max grinned. “Good luck, Rainey.”

“Thank you.” When our coffee came in, we drank it while going over some ideas of where I could take Jesse. The agency had a list of places to go and things to do at the ready for situations just like this, and it definitely formed a good foundation for any visit to the city.

“You’ll have to tailor it for Jesse,” Max said. “Find out more about him and what might appeal to him personally. If you do the right things with him, the city will sell itself. It always does. It’s really not that difficult.”

“It shouldn’t be,” I agreed, but I already knew it wouldn’t be that easy with Jesse.

Regardless, I was in for it now. After I finished my coffee and got dismissed, I wandered down the staircase instead of taking the elevator straight back to my office.

My mind churned with worry, my feet heavy as I found myself making my way to Ellie’s cubicle rather than going back to work. My best friend was a blonde bombshell, a dynamo who I’d met on her first day here and had hit it off with immediately.

Two years younger than me, she hadn’t earned her own office yet, but she was in one of the bigger cubicles situated around the edge of her floor. We wouldn’t have complete privacy, but if we kept our voices down, we would also be able to talk relatively freely.

She looked up as I made my way across their open-plan office, smiling radiantly as she got up to give me a hug when I reached her. “Hey, girl. It feels like I haven’t seen you for ages. What are you doing slumming it down here?”

Chuckling as I hugged her back, I pulled away to look into her deep blue eyes. “I’m not slumming it. I sat here myself

until two years ago, or have you forgotten about that?”

She waved her hand dismissively. “I haven’t forgotten. I just prefer to think of you in your fancy office instead of down here with the rest of us. It motivates me. Seriously, though, what’s up? You look worried. Is Jenna okay?”

At the mention of my daughter, the look in her eyes became almost turbulent. “Oh, God. Something happened to her. Or *is* happening to her. Is she being bullied? Did she get her period?”

“No, she’s fine,” I said quickly, before Ellie’s brain overloaded and she fainted.

She didn’t have kids of her own, but she was very close to Jenna. She was also deeply empathetic. Funny as hell and as sarcastic as the day was long, she had a razor-sharp tongue and a whip-like mind, but if she thought something was wrong with Jenna, she’d lose all sense of reason.

I got why she’d jumped to the conclusion she had, though. Generally speaking, if anything was worrying me, it was Jenna. I pretty much only had her and work in my life, and I was good at my job. I rarely had any reason to be so stressed about it that I came here to solicit her advice.

I stressed, of course. Like everyone else, I was often worried about work or stressed about some aspect of it, but it was only Jenna who made me feel those emotions so deeply that I felt sick to my stomach.

Ellie frowned, her eyes searching mine as she motioned for me to take a seat at the edge of her desk. “If it’s not Jenna, what’s going on with you?”

“There’s a potential new client landing here tomorrow afternoon,” I started slowly. “I went to Portland to make him an offer, but he’s uncertain about moving to New York. Max really wants him, so we’re flying him over for a visit and hoping to convince him to sign on while he’s here.”

“Okay,” she said, her confusion swirling behind her eyes. “That’s not unusual. So what’s the problem?”

I sighed, squeezing my eyes shut so I wouldn't have to look at her while I said it. "The problem is that the client is someone I used to know very well. It's Jesse Slone, Jenna's father."

She was quiet for so long after I made the admission that I opened my eyes to check that she was still there. She was still there, alright. Staring at me like the lightest brush of a feather against her skin would send her toppling off her chair.

"Are you serious?" she breathed eventually, her eyes as wide as I'd ever seen them. "Did you know who he was when you went to recruit him?"

I dipped my head in a curt nod. "He didn't know I was the one coming to recruit him, though. It was a little awkward at first."

Her brows rose slowly before she scoffed. "A little awkward? I'm willing to bet that's the understatement of the century. I can't believe I didn't know about this. Are you okay? Was he super pissed off at you? Did you tell him about Jenna?"

I shook my head. "No to all of the above. It's weird. Those couple of days that we spent together, it felt like we've never been apart. He said he used to be pissed at me for disappearing, but that he's not anymore. It was like we almost picked up right where we left off."

A grin broke out across her face as she looked at me like she'd seen something in me that hadn't been there before. Letting out a low whistle, she sat forward and rolled her chair all the way up to me. "Tell me more. The way I remember this story, you left while the two of you were on good terms. Sleeping together. All gooey and in love, so when you say that you picked up where you left off—"

I groaned. "That's not what's important here. The important part is that he still doesn't know about Jenna and that I can't get involved with him regardless of how he makes me feel. When I'm with him, he's all I want, which means that I can't be with him, but Max is making me take the lead while

he's here. He's hinging my promotion on whether I sign Jesse."

Ellie flinched, but she was still smiling. "Okay, so that *is* a problem, but it's not such a big one. Loosen up. So you get to spend seven days with your ex? It's not that bad. Get yourself a good vibrator and take care of business before you see him. Problem solved."

My cheeks grew hot, and Ellie rolled her eyes at me. "Every self-respecting woman should have a good vibrator. Trust me, it'll get you through this. If all else fails, stick it in your purse and get it on with yourself in a public bathroom if being with him is really that hard."

Glowing like a radioactive tomato, I shook my head at her. "That's not the only problem. If it was just physical, then sure, but it's not. It's just complicated with him, you know? And not just because I had his child and he has no idea."

She blew out a breath as she looked back at me sympathetically. "Okay, so being with him really is going to be hard, but you only have to fake it for a week. Pretend that he's just another client and stick to the agency's script for getting people to move here. It'll be tough, but you can do it. It's only seven days."

Considering what'd happened between us when it was only two days, seven days seemed like an eternity. Ultimately, however, she was right. It was only one week. "What you're saying is that I only need to get through the next seven days without jumping his bones or falling back in love with him?"

"Exactly. We've already talked about how you can avoid jumping his bones. Not falling in love with him should be easy too as long as you can pretend that he's just another client."

He wasn't just another client, though. Far from it. But at the end of the day, I'd been working my butt off for years to get this promotion. This wasn't really any different than that. I just had to keep working my butt off, convince Jesse to move, and then sign the promotion paperwork.

“You can get through the next week,” Ellie encouraged like she could read my thoughts. “Mark the days on your calendar and strike them off every night. The time will fly. I guarantee it.”

Pulling my phone out of my jacket pocket, I did what she’d suggested immediately. I suspected that she was right about time flying, but what I was worried about was the sparks that would fly with it.

“It’s just one week, Rainey,” she repeated for emphasis. “You can do anything if you know that it’s just going to be for one week.”

“Yeah, but that’s the other problem. If I do my job right and he moves here, it’s forever. What the heck am I supposed to do then?”

She smiled. “Represent him from your cushy new office, cash your newly loaded paycheck, and make Rita handle all communications. Stop worrying so much, girl. By this time next week, you’ll be moving yourself, and once you do, I can make a play for your office. Just keep your heart locked up tight and there’s nothing in the world that can stop you.”

Deep down inside, I knew that she’d just correctly identified the biggest problem of them all. I could try to keep my heart locked up as tight as I wanted, but it didn’t matter because Jesse already had the key. To my heart and to any box I could try to lock it in.

As soon as the plane touched down in New York, I remembered why I hated this place so much. The very air here was different, charged with that frenzied electricity that caused the people here to live life at double speed—and I hadn't even disembarked yet.

The hustle and bustle of the people and the city itself slammed into me as I strode toward the baggage carousel, injecting an urgency into my veins that wasn't my own. Huffing out a breath while I waited for my suitcase, I wondered if Callum had been right. Maybe I shouldn't have made this trip after all.

The doubt only lasted until I saw Rainey waiting for me, holding a sign with my name on it. The moment my eyes landed on hers, those bright blues burned away all the uncertainty I'd been feeling about this visit.

I was here for her, not the city. *She* was what the trip was about, and for as long as that was true, I could deal with the noise, the lights, and the annoying fucking people who acted like the world would end if they didn't keep running to their next destination.

A slow, almost reluctant smile spread on her lips as I walked up to her. "Hey. How was your flight?"

She didn't make a move to hug me, but I let go of my bag and opened my arms, giving her the option to greet me the way I wanted to do with her. Chest rising as she took a deep

breath and held it, she gave me a small smile but held out her hand for me to shake instead.

“Welcome to New York,” she said.

I dropped my gaze to her small hand, reaching for it and feeling a flash of heat searing through me as soon as my skin touched hers.

“Thank you,” I said, letting my palm linger against hers for a few moments longer than necessary before I slowly withdrew. “The flight was great. It was first class, so what’s not to love?”

She nodded, some of the tension in her eyes easing as she inclined her head toward the exit doors. “First class is great. I’d live on an airplane if they’d let me stay in that cabin forever, but unfortunately, here on the ground, we’ve got to deal with traffic. Peak time is approaching, so we’d better get to it.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be selling me on the magic of the city?” I joked as I followed her to the parking lot. “It’s been less than five minutes and you’ve already mentioned the traffic.”

Glancing up at me over her shoulder, she winked. “Sure, but there’s traffic everywhere. At least, there’s no half measures in New York. It’s all or nothing. Even the traffic gives it its best each day.”

I laughed. “That’s a unique way of looking at it.”

“I’ve got lots of those little nuggets. Stick with me, and I’ll teach you my ways. You’ll be an optimist before you know it.”

“Thanks, but I’m going with being a realist.” I grinned. “It helps me deal with the blows if I know they’re coming.”

“Well, if you sign with us, I’ll be dealing with the blows without you even knowing about them. It’s another perk of the contract.”

“You’d be my agent, not my personal assistant.”

She shrugged, laughter in her eyes as she looked back at me again. “You know, sometimes there’s not that much of a

difference between the two. Think about it. Most of people's stress comes from their job. If you've got someone taking the sting out of that for you, then everything else is much easier to deal with."

"Now you're starting to sound like someone trying to sign me," I said. "What else have you got, Hollenbeck? Give me your best pitch."

"That's what the city is supposed to do during your visit, isn't it? Either you're going to like what it has to offer enough to move here, or you're not. New York is what it is. Sure, there's lots of different versions of it, but if you can't live with the basics, you're not going to like it here."

"Aaaand we're back to me wondering if you even want me to sign up with you. So far, we've got two in the cons column and only one in the pros."

She chuckled. "Give it time, Slone. Living here is unlike anything else you'll ever experience. Life is fast paced and stuff, sure, but there's a certain wow factor to everyday life that just cannot be replicated. You can search far and wide, but you'll never find any place like it."

"I'm not sure I'd want to find any place like it," I said honestly.

On the one hand, I'd wanted to come here to spend time with her, but on the other, I didn't want to give her false hope. I was curious about what Gravity had to offer and there were definitely professional benefits to signing with them, but the moving thing was a very real issue for me.

As of right this minute, I had zero intention of relocating anywhere—least of all to New York City. Rainey motioned to a little red Mazda when she slowed in the parking lot. "That's us. It's not fancy, but it gets me where I need to go."

"Thankfully, I don't need value. I find no value in luxury simply for the sake of something being luxurious."

A beep sounded as she unlocked the car, and I took a minute while putting my suitcase in the trunk and closing it to wonder what her mode of transportation said about her life

here. Callum had also been right when he'd said she had one of those, a life in this city that I knew nothing about.

Her car was my first real clue. It wasn't brand new, but it also wasn't beat up or ancient. It certainly wasn't a flashy kind of vehicle that said *hotshot agent*. Instead, it was modest. Nice enough, but practical and safe.

All of which lined up with what I knew about her. Satisfied that her life obviously wouldn't be completely shocking to me, I buckled up and soon realized that I might've jumped to conclusions about her. We were hardly on the road when she started yelling at the other drivers, her fist raised and her face scrunched up as she shouted at people about cutting her off or braking too suddenly.

"Whoa," I muttered, grabbing the oh-shit handle when she veered into the next lane without any warning. "Have you always had road rage, or did the traffic here bring it out in you?"

She rolled her pretty eyes at me with an amused smile tugging at her lips. "If you think this is road rage, you've got a lot to learn, young padawan. This is nothing. It's simply the way we New Yorkers greet each other from behind the wheel."

It was the first time she'd referred to herself as a New Yorker, and it was like the words smacked me over the head with a healthy dose of reality. I was here to spend time with her, but I didn't want to move here. She lived here. While I'd told myself I'd only come here to get closure, it'd be a blatant lie if I said that I hadn't been hoping to see what else could happen between us.

Anything serious would require—

You're getting way ahead of yourself here, Slone.

Meanwhile, Rainey was back in tour guide mode, doing her best to point out that even the traffic had ways around it. "What you want to do is to stay off the main thoroughfares. There are always better roads to be taking anyway and you can cut your commute in half if you know where to go."

“That’s good to know,” I said, taking mental notes of her tips but also distracted by the woman herself as she drove me to my hotel.

Making noncommittal noises while she explained all the best routes from the airport to the neighborhood where I’d be staying for the week, I took in the way she leaned forward over the steering wheel, adorably angry as she kept yelling at other drivers. She was wearing a navy wraparound dress today, and it gave me the slightest view of her cleavage that I couldn’t stop staring at. Her hair was pulled up into a high ponytail and her jewelry was simple, thin golden chains that adorned her graceful neck, her wrists, and even her ears.

“So, I’ll come and pick you up for dinner after you get settled,” she was saying as we started slowing near a massive hotel coming up on our right. “Max made reservations for us at a restaurant that usually has a two-month waiting period. That’s another one of the perks of joining Gravity. We’ve got contacts everywhere. There are very few places we can’t get you into if they strike your fancy.”

“I’m not really an exclusive club or restaurant kind of guy, but sure. I get how that could be a good selling point.”

She chuckled. “That’s why I told him we wouldn’t be using the reservation. I’ve already given the table to one of my other clients. I’ve got other plans for us.”

A slow grin spread on my face. “That’s great. You had me worried for a minute there.”

“Worried?” She glanced at me with barely restrained laughter shining from those blue irises. “Why? Did you think I’d gone full fancy-pants agent on you?”

“Yeah, I kind of did.” I shifted gears on our conversation just as she shifted back down to first gear while we sat in the traffic approaching the hotel. “What sold you on New York? You’ve never told me how you ended up here. I’ve got to admit, I wouldn’t have thought you’d love it so much, even if I had known you lived here now.”

She shrugged. “New York didn’t have to sell itself to me. It wasn’t my choice to come here, so it didn’t matter what I thought of it originally. My dad got a job here, and since my mom had family who lived here before they died, it was an easy yes for them. Her family gave us a soft landing when we arrived. We stayed with them until they found a place for us and then they were always around if we had questions and to show us the ropes.”

Less than a day in the city, and I already had an answer I’d been wanting for a long time now. I didn’t know if she’d left me all those years ago for a dying family member. *No way. She’d have told me if that was it.*

So okay. I still didn’t know why she’d left, but at least I now knew how and why she’d wound up here. It was progress, and it reaffirmed that my decision to come had been the right one. If she kept giving me honest, candid answers to my questions, I would find that closure I needed.

Either that, or things between us would get blown wide open and I’d have to make the decision about the move not based on the city, but based on my relationship with her. It was either one of the two at the moment.

Shut tight or wide open. Only time would tell which one would end up being true.

After dinner, I took Jesse to a low-key, local karaoke bar. Max hadn't been impressed when I'd told him we wouldn't be keeping the reservation he'd made us, but I'd known Jesse wouldn't have appreciated the fine-dining, uptight experience at Noku.

Instead, I'd taken him to a small bistro situated at the top of a bohemian-chic hotel. The place had a view for days, showcasing the city skyline all lit up and ready for the night ahead.

After seeing the view of Portland that he'd chosen for himself when he'd moved into that apartment, I'd figured that showing him that we had views too would be more convincing than tiny plates of great food. I'd been right, too.

When we'd walked in and he'd seen the spacious rooftop dining area, he'd been visibly taken aback. He hadn't said anything about it, but I'd noticed it when he'd relaxed a bit. Like he didn't feel quite as much like the walls were closing in on him.

Staring at me as I led him into the bar and the penny dropped about what it was, he let out a burst of surprised laughter. Raising his voice so I'd be able to hear him over the din, he poked me in the ribs. "Are you going to sing for me, Rainey Hollenbeck?"

I shrugged, smiling as I waggled my brows at him. "You might not want me to do that. I sound like a cat being stepped

on at the best of times. If you really want me to, I might go up there, but I thought you might enjoy being here.”

Looking around curiously as he followed me to the table I’d reserved for us right in the center of the action, he nodded. We sat down. “This is definitely more my speed than a lot of other places would’ve been.”

I beamed at him. “Please make sure you tell Max that you liked it. He’s worried about me going off-script with the agency’s proposed plans for the evening.”

He chuckled, dipping his chin in a nod. “I’ll do that. Thank God they didn’t send someone else to show me around. I’d have been stuck at some trendy Instagram bar right now where everything was made of glass.”

If it was up to me, someone else would’ve been showing you around. I didn’t say it out loud, though. Jesse had been visibly skeptical all afternoon. This was the first time since I’d picked him up from the airport that he seemed more open to the idea of New York, so I definitely wasn’t letting him know that I’d have left him with someone else if I’d had a choice.

Intent on keeping things light and fun for tonight, I ordered us alcohol-free beers and held up my bottle when they arrived. “To hanging out with an old friend and a potential new client.”

“You’re not going to let me forget about the client bit, huh?” he joked, but I also thought he wasn’t completely joking.

Where I was focused on getting through this week by trying to treat him as just another potential client, he seemed to want to be more friendly than professional. I smiled. “If I let you forget about it, how am I going to convince you to take our offer?”

“You have a lot riding on this, huh?”

“I do,” I admitted. “So do you. What do you think so far?”

“Do you want the truth, or the watered-down version of it where I sound like I’m halfway there already?”

I considered the question even though I probably shouldn't have. I should've opted for the optimistic version of his answer, but in the end, false hope wouldn't help me. "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"I thought you'd go for that option," he said, running one hand casually through his thick, dark hair before he exhaled heavily through his nostrils. Although I couldn't hear it, I saw it happening before he fessed up. "Cards on the table, I detest this city. Or, okay, maybe I don't detest it, but I sure don't like it. Being here has always been disruptively overstimulating for me. I'm here to give it a chance, and you've definitely already made me think about it more than anyone else would've, but I'm just not sure if I could ever see myself living here full time."

My spirits started sinking before I reminded myself that he'd come here for that exact reason. He wasn't convinced, but he was possibly open to being wooed by the city. "Thank you for telling me, and look, I get it. I felt the same way initially. It's loud. It's busy. It's hectic. The people are mostly brash and they almost always seem to be on the move."

His brows twitched up. "You're agreeing with me?"

I shrugged a shoulder. "To a certain extent, but I'm also here to tell you that it doesn't have to be that way. There are many pockets of calm. Places of silence, and wonder, and appreciation. It definitely depends on where you live, who you surround yourself with, and ultimately, what you make of it. I, for one, wouldn't even have known which clubs were hot right now if it wasn't for my clients."

"Is that true?"

I gave him a disbelieving look. "Do you think I'd lie to you? You know where I come from. How I grew up. How much I love nature and wide-open spaces. None of that has changed, and yet I'm happy here. I wasn't lying earlier when I said there's something about this place that is utterly intoxicating."

He spread his elbows on the table, those dark green eyes never leaving mine. "On that note, you also know where I

come from and what I love.”

I noticed that he hadn't included that I knew how he'd grown up. Which was fair, I didn't, but I still took note of the omission as he continued. “You also know how much I love nature and wide-open spaces. Portland may be a city, and it may not be rural or anything, but it's not New York. To be honest with you, even Portland is too busy for me most days. So knowing that, what would you have done in my position?”

While I knew what the unofficial Gravity script would want me to answer, I also knew that Jesse would know I was lying if I said it. “I would've kept an open mind. The prospect of moving to a new city is always going to be daunting, irrespective of which city it is. Moving, even just to a different house in the same suburb, is a big decision. It can be a traumatic experience no matter which way you slice it, but in the end, it also almost always signifies growth. Positive or negative.”

Those eyes remained on mine, as intense as ever. “Would you have done it? Taken the offer?”

“I don't know,” I said honestly. “All I know is that I would've given it some serious thought. Even if you do choose to move here, it wouldn't have to be forever. You also wouldn't have to spend every minute here for the rest of your life. With the kind of money you could be making, you could even look into living outside the city and commuting in when you have to. Who knows? You may even be able to split your time if that's what you want to do.”

“You think they'd let me do that?”

I stared back at him, then nodded once. “Yes, I do think so. We don't have to see all of our talent every day. In fact, once we get into the swing of things, we'd be communicating often but we wouldn't see each other all that much at all. A lot of our clients travel a lot. Most of them have second or even third homes. It's the nature of the game in many instances that you're not in the city permanently. I have one client who's been on tour for the greater part of the last year, for example.

When it wraps up, he's going to lay low in the UK with his family for a couple of months."

Jesse didn't say anything for a long minute after I stopped talking, but I could see him thinking about everything I'd said. "I'll keep all that in mind. Thanks for being honest with me."

"You're welcome." I relaxed a little, glad that my gamble in not giving him the scripted answer had paid off. "Now, I signed you up for a song when I called ahead to make sure we'd have a table. Are you ready?"

He narrowed his eyes at me. "No. I don't sing, Rainey. I just write the songs."

"Sure, but I saw all those guitars at your place. You even have a baby grand piano and a keyboard in that home studio of yours. I know you can sing."

"Coax all you want, but I'm not going up there."

Ten minutes later when the emcee called his name, he went up there—reluctantly, and it had taken all of those ten minutes of coaxing—but he sighed and stood up, eyes twinkling in the low light as he shot me a teasing glare.

"Fine, I'm going, but I'll get you back for this."

"Do your worst," I said happily. "I can take it. If you really want me to, I'll even sing tonight. We'll just have to get people to agree to not hold me liable if their eardrums burst."

He laughed, but then made his way to the small stage and took his place behind the microphone. The song I'd chosen for him was one we'd listened to often in high school, and while I didn't know if he still loved it as much as he used to, at least it was one I knew for a fact he'd heard before.

As he folded his fingers over the microphone and the first bars of the song started playing, he looked right into my eyes. I doubted he could see them with the lights in front of him, but it sure felt like he could. Surprise flickered in his gaze when he recognized the tune, and then a tiny hint of a smile appeared at the corners of his lips before he started singing.

When he did, my world bottomed out. Everything and everyone around us disappeared as he kept looking at me—or rather, in my direction—while he sang about love, and sex, and everything in between. Until now, I’d known that Max wanted him and I’d understood why, but seeing him up there made me realize why my boss had chosen him over thousands of other songwriters.

He had real talent, and not just for writing. I knew he wasn’t interested in singing himself or the limelight, but wow. *Just wow.*

By the time the song ended, every other patron was staring at him with as much awe as I was. There was a moment of stunned silence when the last note ended, and then the crowd started cheering and going wild like they’d just seen their favorite superstar in action.

Due to popular demand, he stayed onstage for two more songs before he finally joined me back at the table. Smirking in that sexy, confident way of his, he leaned forward and caught my gaze, locking my eyes to his as surely as if he’d used super glue. “It’s your turn now, baby. If their eardrums burst, at least it’s you they’ll be looking at when it happens.”

I laughed, but then the emcee called my name next and my stomach sank to my shoes. Still, by the time we left, everyone’s eardrums were intact and Jesse didn’t even mock me about my glaring lack of talent in the singing department.

When we got back to his hotel, his hand found mine in the darkness of my car and he turned his head to look at me. “You’re welcome to come up if you want.”

“Thank you, but I have to go.” My parents would have my ass if I stayed out all night—as juvenile as that sounded. “I’ll see you tomorrow, though. Good night.”

“Good night.” His eyes stayed on mine as he backed away from me and opened the door and climbed out.

I watched him walking into the hotel, staying until I saw him disappearing into the elevator. I wished that I could’ve

stayed. *Aww, what the hell? Who am I kidding, I should have stayed.*

That was the danger that was waiting for me this entire week, though. Jesse drew me in like no one else did, and I went willingly, wanting not only to be drawn in but to stay there. When I thought about it like that, it was no surprise that I'd let him knock me up once.

Heck, given half the chance, I'd let him do it to me time and time again. Jesse Slone was a habit I just wasn't able to kick, but that might have been because I didn't want to.

The scent of bacon and coffee wafted in the lobby when I went to get breakfast on my first morning in the city from hell. My suite at the hotel was supposedly soundproof, but I would have liked to talk to whoever had done the soundproofing because they hadn't done a spectacular job of it.

On the other hand, I wasn't sure anything could drown out the noise of this place. At about four a.m., I'd seriously considered doing a quick internet search for quieter neighborhoods and checking myself into a hotel there.

The management at Gravity had obviously chosen this establishment for its swankiness and proximity to both their offices and the nightlife, but it'd been a piss-poor choice to put a guy like me in. If anything, I was more convinced than ever that I didn't want to live here.

As I crossed the lobby, I caught a glimpse of a curvy blonde frantically walking toward the elevators, and everything in me stopped. That was all it took for me to know it was Rainey—the way my very blood reacted to her.

I couldn't even see her face, and yet I knew it was her. I couldn't see anything except her back as she dashed to catch the next ride up, but it was definitely her. The buzzing in my veins confirmed it without a shadow of a doubt.

“Rainey?” I called, and despite the bustle of the busy lobby, she slammed to a stop and turned slowly to face me.

With red cheeks and an aggravated look in her eyes, she changed direction and marched toward me instead. When she reached me, apologies rambled out of her so fast that it took me a moment to realize what she was saying.

“I’m so, so sorry. I was supposed to take you for breakfast and I would’ve been here earlier, but I ran into some issues and I had to sort them out before I could come. Have you eaten yet? I mean, are you on your way to breakfast or back to your room? Shit. I’ve royally messed this up, haven’t I?”

Waiting for a beat to make sure she’d said everything she wanted to say, I grinned and put my hands on her shoulders, squeezing them lightly as I bent my knees to be on her eye level. “Breathe, Rainey. We’re okay. You’re okay. You haven’t messed anything up. I haven’t eaten yet, but I’m good with the breakfast they’ve got here. We don’t have to go anywhere else.”

“Are you sure? There’s a place overlooking the Hudson that does the best eggs benedict you’ve ever had.”

I chuckled, releasing her and watching as reason seemed to return to her previously panicked eyes. “I don’t like eggs benedict. I’m really fine with fruit, bacon, and pancakes. And coffee. That’s the most important part, the coffee. Should we go get a table? You look like the last thing you need is more caffeine, but maybe we should get some food into you.”

Closing her eyes, she breathed in deep and some of that frantic energy seemed to have left her when she looked at me again. “Okay. Yes. Let’s do that. Food sounds great, but so does caffeine. Contrary to what it might look like, I haven’t actually had any today. Maybe that’s what’s wrong with me. I’m suffering from withdrawal.”

I laughed when she flashed me a small smile on the last part of her sentence. Then I took her arm and linked it with mine, leading her to the dining room. We found a table near the windows overlooking the gardens, and while they weren’t vast, they were beautiful.

Rainey sighed happily as she turned to look at the space outside, then looked like she was about to burst into tears

when a waitress came around carrying some coffee. She filled up our mugs and told us what was on the menu for breakfast before leaving us alone again.

Once she did, Rainey seemed remarkably calmer when she faced me again. “I really am sorry for being so late. I had that issue to attend to and then the traffic getting here was murder. For a while there, I thought I might be in time to take you to dinner instead of breakfast.”

I didn’t point out that she was reiterating something that bugged me so much about this city. Instead, I smiled and fought the urge to reach for her hand. “It’s really not a problem. I didn’t even know you were planning on taking me to breakfast and I only woke up about thirty minutes ago, so if you’d gotten here when you’d probably planned to, I’d still have been asleep.”

She breathed out a sigh of relief. “You’re lucky. I can’t remember the last time I slept in. My alarm goes off at five thirty, and most mornings, I’m up before it makes a sound.”

I grimaced. “That sounds awful. What on God’s green earth could you possibly have to do so early?”

“Just stuff. I like to be able to start the day at my own speed, and if I’m not up by then, it’s always just too much of a rush.”

“What are we doing today that you were so worried about missing out on, then?” I asked as the same waitress from before brought us a platter of fresh fruit and some yogurt. “Whatever it is, I’m sure we can still do it.”

“Sure, we can. It’s just some sightseeing, but after all that traffic, I’m wondering if we shouldn’t stick to things that are within walking distance.” She told me a little more of what we could do in the area while we ate. Then we walked toward the buffet serving the main breakfast items together.

After dishing up, we went back to our table and talked a bit more, but we were only about halfway through when her phone rang. As soon as her gaze hit the screen and she saw who was calling, her jaw clenched and her brow furrowed.

“This is Rainey Hollenbeck,” she answered after picking up the device. “Is everything okay?”

For the rest of the conversation, she didn’t say another word, listening intently instead and only making noises in response to whatever the person on the other end of the line was saying. I had no idea who it was or what they were talking about, but she was clearly pissed off about something by the time she hung up.

“I have to go somewhere,” she gritted out as soon as she got off the phone. Pushing to her feet, she shoved the device into her purse and turned to me with a distracted but apologetic smile on her face. “I’m so sorry, but this can’t wait. I need to go right away.”

“I’ll tag along,” I said, immediately setting down my cutlery and standing up with her. “I don’t mind. Honestly. Whatever you’ve got going on is probably a hell of a lot better than aimless sightseeing.”

She didn’t look happy about it, but the speed at which she walked as we left the breakfast area told me that she didn’t have time to argue with me. Once we were in the car, she didn’t say a word, simply gunning it to our destination, so deep in thought that she didn’t even yell at anyone along the way.

When we pulled into the parking lot of a school, I frowned but didn’t ask any questions. Rainey let out a sigh, turning to me as she opened her door. “Any chance you’d be willing to wait in the car?”

“Nah, I said I was tagging along and I am. What are we doing here?”

Her teeth ground together. “Seeing the principal. It’s only fair that I should tell you the meeting probably isn’t going to be pretty.”

She got out and strode toward the front entrance with her head held high and murder in her eyes. I had no idea what we were doing at a school. I’d thought we were going to deal with

a wayward client or something, which this could still have been.

When we walked into an elderly woman's office, I saw the young girl already waiting in there, and I knew I'd definitely been wrong. The girl was way too young to be a client of Rainey's, and when she turned to her with tears shimmering in her eyes that were also tight with rage, I finally figured out that this was about something else entirely.

"Ms. Hollenbeck." The woman—who I assumed was the principal—glanced at me and then waved for us both to take a seat. "Thank you for coming in so quickly. As you know, we don't tolerate violence at school. The incident Jenna was involved in violates several rules in our code of conduct."

"I understand," Rainey said tightly. "Can you give me some information about the incident? All I was told was that she punched someone."

The principal nodded before sending a disapproving glare at the girl. "There was an altercation with Owen Henderson, a classmate of hers. He was passing her in the hall this morning when she suddenly punched him."

Taken aback, I took another look at the girl. There was something familiar about her, but I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was. It just felt like I'd seen her somewhere before.

She leaned back in her chair with her arms folded tightly across her chest—in pretty much exactly the same pose as I was—and she scowled, looking like she was only barely stopping herself from interrupting.

I didn't know what Owen Henderson had done, but I got the feeling that she hadn't just suddenly punched him. This girl had something to say, but no one was giving her the opportunity to say it.

As Rainey and the principal kept talking, the girl looked more and more resigned to her fate, and it was then that I realized why she looked familiar. That resigned look on her

face was almost identical to the expression on Rainey's when she'd gotten that call.

I frowned again, trying to piece it together as I listened to the principal telling Rainey to take the girl home. Something grated at me about the interaction, but I didn't think now was the time to voice it.

When we were told that the meeting was over, Rainey shoved her chair back and glared at the girl before glancing at me. "Come on, you two. We've leaving."

With that, she strode out ahead of us while the girl and I followed her out. As we were leaving, the girl shot me a curious look, obviously wondering who I was, but as she let out a long-suffering sigh, I realized she'd decided the exact same thing as I had.

This was not the time to ask questions.

I could practically see the steam coming out of Rainey's ears as she marched to the car, and while I had sympathy for the girl, I understood why Rainey was so pissed. Punching people was unacceptable behavior under almost all circumstances, but I wondered if Rainey had forgotten that she'd done it once or twice herself.

I smiled when I thought about it. My Rainey had been a firecracker in high school, and whoever this girl was to her, I had a feeling she was the same. *This trip definitely just took a turn for the interesting.*

Maybe I was finally about to get some more answers about Rainey's life in New York. After I stuck up for the girl, that was. I didn't approve of randomly punching people, but I'd had Rainey's back when she'd been in hot water for it, and it didn't matter if I knew this girl or not. She needed someone to have her back, and I'd have to be the one who did it.

Fuming, afraid, and fully aware that my daughter and her father were meeting one another without knowing it, I stormed to the car in an attempt to clear my mind. I had to let go of the fear and focus on Jenna's behavior, but I needed to get my head in the game in order to do that.

Right now, all I could think about was her and Jesse walking side by side behind me. God, she looked so much like him. Or maybe it was just because I knew she was his, but she'd always had an uncanny resemblance to him in my opinion.

There had been days when I'd felt like I was only the vessel and that she was all his. On the other hand, he wasn't expecting her to be his, so maybe he wouldn't see it. A lot of people said she looked just like me, only with slightly darker coloring and a more greenish hue to her eyes.

I guessed that it depended on how much a person knew. My parents had never said anything about it at all, and since they were some of the only people who knew who had fathered her, I didn't quite know what to think.

Either way, they were together now. In the heat of the moment after that phone call, I hadn't wanted to take the time to argue with him about tagging along. Now, I was wishing I'd just turned him down and walked away.

I would have had to explain it later, but I would have to do that now anyway. Plus, while I hadn't exactly hidden the fact that I had a daughter from him, I hadn't been forthcoming with

the information either. As I walked, they were both staring their questions at the back of my head so loudly that I could hear them ringing in my ears even if neither of them had said anything out loud.

Once we were all in the car, instead of waiting for either of them to get a word in edgewise, I flicked my gaze up to the rearview mirror and met Jenna's eyes. "You *punched* him? Are you kidding me right now? What were you thinking?"

Jesse piped up before my daughter could answer me. "Uh, this is just a suggestion, but have you heard Jenna's side of the story?"

Red flashed around the edges of my vision, but I breathed through it. Now wasn't the time to get into it with him. "Punching someone is never the answer, so it doesn't really matter what her side of the story is. There's no excuse and now she's been suspended."

Obviously encouraged by Jesse's support, Jenna leaned forward as far as the seatbelt would allow her to. "Owen was being mean to one of my friends. He's been doing it for months now and I wasn't going to let it happen anymore. He's a jerk. A bully who was acting like Grandma."

"I don't care what he did," I repeated. "Violence is never the answer. We've talked about this—"

Jesse turned in his seat, regarding Jenna before he cocked his head at her. "It sounds like self-defense to me. Do you know how to throw a proper punch? You didn't hurt yourself, did you?"

Blinking hard, I swallowed past my rage, and for the first time, thanked God that I was single parent. "Seriously? That's your question, whether she knows how to throw a proper punch? Are you actually insane? She just got suspended, or did you miss that part?"

"I didn't miss that part." He glanced at me, looking me over before he let out a breath and held up his hands. "I just know what it feels like to be the kid who doesn't get asked any

questions about themselves after something like that happens, but I'm done now."

The rest of the ride passed in silence, with Jesse looking dangerously contemplative beside me and Jenna pouting in the back. As we pulled up to our house, I met her gaze in the mirror again. "You and I will talk about this later, young lady. Behave for Grandma today, okay?"

Jenna grumbled and didn't agree or disagree as she climbed out of the car and stomped her way up to our front door. I stayed until she'd let herself in, wondering if she would tell my mother that there had been a man with me when I'd picked her up.

Thankfully, I'd avoided having to give her his name, and even if I had, I doubted she'd have told my mother. Those two were always fighting, and considering why she was home early today, I knew my mother wouldn't be as focused on who had been with me as she would be on the altercation Jenna had been involved in.

Since both of them knew that the songwriter I was trying to sign was in town this week, I was hoping that she had just assumed that was who he was and that neither of them would ask any questions. I was hoping for the same thing about Jesse, but I also knew that I wouldn't get so lucky with him.

"For the record," I said once we got on the road again. "I don't need any help disciplining her. I've been raising this girl her whole life and I will decide what's best for her."

"I know. I'm sorry if I overstepped. It's just that I remember you punching a guy for the exact same reason when we were in high school. If anyone would understand, I'd have thought it was you."

"Have you ever heard that old saying about not doing what I do, but doing what I say?"

He smirked. "Have I ever. Look, I really am sorry. I just thought you'd be a little more understanding. Plus, it was triggering for me. No one used to ask for my side of the story back when I was the one having their parents called by the

principal, and it was devastating. While we're on the subject—and this is the last thing I'm going to say about it—you should check her fist tonight. I fractured one of my knuckles once when I was an early teenager. It still hurts like a bitch.”

“Thanks for the tip,” I muttered dryly, keeping my eyes laser focused on the road instead of looking back at him.

For the next few miles, he kept his mouth shut, staring thoughtfully out the window. While he did, I braced myself for the inevitable. At least I knew it was coming, so when he asked me about her, I had more of an idea about what to say.

“You didn't tell me you had a daughter.”

I nodded my agreement. “We had a few other things to talk about. It never really came up.”

He thought it over. “I guess that's true. We did have a few things of our own to talk about. I don't mean to sound presumptuous, but is *she* one of those things? Of our own, I mean?”

My stomach turned to lead. “Are you asking me if she's yours?”

Pausing before he nodded, he finally turned to face me fully. I couldn't look at him the same way since I was driving, but I felt him staring that question into me while he waited for me to respond.

“No,” I lied finally. “She's not.”

A frown flashed on his features in my periphery before he schooled them. “Are you sure? How old is she?”

“She's twelve, and before you say it, I know how that sounds. The math adds up, but it doesn't. After we left Texas, I was so mad at my parents that I had a one-night stand just after we arrived. She's the product of my rebellious behavior.”

I felt sick when I said it, but I didn't have much of a choice. My parents had sat me down a long time ago and they'd spelled it out for me what would happen if I ever told Jesse about his baby. She hadn't even been born yet, but my circumstances hadn't changed that much.

Looking him up would've hurt too badly anyway, but there was another reason I'd never told him. Aside from everything else, there was that threat they'd made three nights before her birth. Knowing that her arrival was so close, I'd been nearly hysterical with fear and wracked with guilt.

My mom had walked into my room when I'd had my phone in my hand to call him. At the time, I'd wanted nothing more than to come clean and to beg him to be with me for the birth. As soon as my mom had seen the phone, she'd known what I was about to do.

Plucking it out of my hand, she'd sat me down on my bed and then she'd called my dad to join us. Together, they'd told me that if I ever reached out to him or told him about Jenna, they would cut me off. They said that I'd be on my own in every respect, and that as a teenage mother with no support system, no job, and not even a high school diploma, no court in the country would deny their request for custody.

I was an adult now, but I still lived with them. It was well documented that they helped me out a lot, practically and financially, and although I knew that my circumstances had changed, it would never feel like they'd changed enough. Deep down inside, I was still terrified that they'd take her from me.

My mother had mentioned the conversation a few times over the years. Once, when I'd been on the verge of moving out, she'd even pointed out that they could provide a much better, much more stable household for Jenna to grow up in and that they wouldn't hesitate to do what they had to if they felt it was necessary to protect her.

The fear that they would follow through on the threat was a huge, ugly beast living inside of me. Not only had they said that their lawyer was of the opinion that they had a case, but I definitely wouldn't be able to afford protracted litigation—and I didn't have the heart or the stomach for a custody battle with my own parents.

It killed me to lie to him, and I'd always promised myself that if he ever asked me pointblank, I'd tell him the truth. Now

that it'd happened, though, I was just too scared. Between him and my parents, it was very probable that *someone* would try to take her from me if I told the truth.

If anyone wanted to call me a coward for that, then they had to go ahead and do it. She was my daughter, my life, and my world. I wouldn't lose her, and if I had to lie for now until I figured out what else to do, then I would do it.

"You're right that I should've been more understanding," I said softly, breaking the silence that had fallen between us. "I did punch those people to defend my friends, and as much as I wish I hadn't, I can't get away from the fact that I did. It happened. Just like it happened to her today. It's just difficult to keep things in perspective sometimes."

"It must be hard," he agreed quietly, holding my gaze when we stopped at a traffic light. "You're sure she's not mine? Given the timing, she could be."

I shook my head firmly. "She's not yours, Jesse. I really do understand why you'd think she might be, but trust me when I say that she's not."

He kept his eyes on mine until the light changed and I had to look away, feeling more guilty than ever. Swallowing past it, I forced a smile to my lips and tried to change the subject. "We can finally get our day started now. Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be," he said, his eyes far-away, but only until he blinked himself back into the present and gave me a smile just as forced as my own. "Let's go take a look at New York, Rainey. I'm pretty excited to see what you've got planned to bring us back from all that."

I swept my tongue across my lips. *Yeah, so am I. Only, I don't have anything planned just yet.*

“Times Square?” I arched a brow at her when Rainey parked and led me directly to the busiest, most touristy tourist trap of them all. “Are you sure about this?”

“I am,” she said confidently. “Times Square is a New York staple. No trip is complete until you’ve been here, so I thought it was better to start with it and to work our way back from here. It’ll give you an idea of how diverse the city really is if you compare this to some of the other places I’m going to take you.”

“Okay then.” I rubbed my hands together, craning my neck to get a good look around.

In the back of my mind, I couldn’t stop thinking about her daughter, though. I would rather have gone somewhere to talk about it, but it looked like she’d said everything she was going to say on the subject. If I was being honest, I’d have admitted to her that for a minute there, when I’d thought that Jenna was mine, I’d been excited.

Hell, more than excited. For just a minute there, I’d seen myself building a life here with Rainey and our daughter. I’d envisioned getting to know her and figuring out how to get close to her after I’d missed so much.

As soon as Rainey had looked me in the eye and said that she wasn’t mine, my heart had plummeted. Disappointment had raced through me like a damn wildfire. So much so that it had rendered me pretty much speechless for the drive over here.

Hopes and dreams for a family I'd never known I wanted this had crashed and burned, and it'd taken me a few minutes of contemplation to bury the inferno down inside again. Jenna wasn't mine and neither was Rainey.

The latter was only spending time with me in an effort to get promoted while the former didn't even know my name. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but maybe Rainey had brought me to the right place after all. I'd never have visited of my own accord, but it sure made for a good distraction.

As I took in the iconic sights, I tried to breathe through the lingering disappointment and to bring order to my chaotic thoughts. I'd really put the cart before the horse with my idle daydreams about building a family of my own.

In reality, Rainey and I would've had to get over some pretty fucking gigantic hurdles before we got that far. Like the fact that I had a child who was twelve years old and she'd never breathed a word about her to me. Like the fact that it would've meant she'd fled from Texas—from me—when she'd found out she was pregnant instead of letting me be there for her. Like the fact that I'd have wanted nothing more, even back then, than to build the life with her that I'd sometimes let myself dream about even at only eighteen years old. Like the fact that she'd have stolen that opportunity from me when she'd pulled her disappearing act.

None of that would've been easy to work through. In fact, I wasn't sure we would've been able to work through it at all, especially not since she'd also taken another whole week from me by not telling me when she'd come to Portland. But it was nice to dream every once in a while. I didn't let myself do it nearly often enough.

Dreaming was synonymous with disappointment as far as I was concerned, and I'd just learned that lesson once again. A finger at my ribs yanked me out of my thoughts and my gaze snapped to the side the finger had come from.

Rainey was there, staring up at me with understanding in those beautiful blue eyes. "Just ask me what you want to ask me, Jesse. I can practically hear you thinking from all the way

over here, and that's saying something considering where we are right now."

I chuckled, sliding my hands into my pockets as I turned to face her. "Who's her father? I know you said she's the product of a one-night stand, but does he at least support you financially?"

"No, and that's not really any of your business."

I released a slow breath. "I know it's not, but that was a pretty big bombshell to have dropped on my head with no warning. Why didn't you just tell me you had a daughter? And don't give me that *it didn't come up* crap."

"It didn't come up," she repeated, shrugging before she shook her head at me. "I don't know, okay? You didn't ask, so I didn't tell. Seeing you again for the first time in so long was a lot for me to handle, Jesse. Especially after the way I left things between us. We had our stuff to figure out, and she's not a part of that."

"Sure, I get that and it's all true, but at the same time, you could've just mentioned her. Maybe shown me a picture. Don't parents love showing people pictures of their kids?"

"We do, but I'm pretty protective of Jenna. She's also at that age now where she only scowls at the camera, so there's that."

"Which brings me to my next question," he said. "I know I promised I wouldn't say anything else about this, but does she get in trouble a lot?"

Rainey's nostrils flared, but then she dragged in a breath and rocked her head from side to side. "She's a smart ass, but no. She never used to get in trouble a lot. Honestly? She still doesn't, but there have been a few incidents recently. She's coming into her own, and it's almost like she's assuming the role of the protector she never had."

She clapped her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide when they sped back to mine. "Oh, God. I didn't mean to say that. Shit, I'm sorry. That's a definite overshare. My daughter's

issues with never having had a male figure in her life are not your problem, and neither is my feelings on the matter.”

My heart did this weird, throbbing thing. It took me a beat to realize that it was aching for her—Jenna. Reaching up, I curled my finger around a lock of Rainey’s hair, holding her gaze with my own. “You don’t need to apologize to me. We’ve always been honest with each other, right? Why stop now? As for the protector thing, I kind of get it. It’s just a phase, though. The punching, I mean. She’ll find healthier ways to deal with it eventually.”

“I just wish *eventually* would be now,” she admitted. “I’m worried about her. If this behavior continues, I don’t know where we’re going to end up, but it won’t be anyplace good.”

“You’re a great mother, Rainey. You’ll figure it out.”

She frowned, her eyes never leaving mine. “How do you know? In fact, the only time you’ve ever seen me mothering was when you were disagreeing with what I was doing.”

“I wasn’t disagreeing, and the fact that you dropped everything instantly and raced over there was my first clue. The fact that you lectured her about it was my second, and all that love in your eyes even when you were pissed at her was the third. You are a great mother, Rainey. A lot of kids would kill to have a mom who reams them for getting in trouble after rushing to school to pick them up.”

She paused for a beat. “You were one of those kids, weren’t you?”

As I looked down into those eyes, something in me finally released and allowed me to give her just this one little piece of me. “Yes, I was. There was a time when I’d have given anything to have my mother lecture me for punching someone and then taking me back to a beautiful, loving home with the promise of talking more about it later.”

I hesitated before asking again, but I had to be sure. “Is there any chance that she’s mine?”

“No.” There was a flicker of darkness in her eyes when she said it, something that looked almost like fear, but I didn’t

want to pry or intrude more than I already had.

“Okay.” I took my hands out of my pockets and motioned toward a ridiculously overpriced coffee truck on the sidewalk. “May I replenish the caffeine in your veins? You’ve got to be running dry after all that excitement.”

The tension slowly melted away from her beautiful features and she laughed, pressing her hand to her chest as she did. “Be still, my beating heart. That’s the best offer I’ve heard in a long time. Maybe even forever.”

Taking her arm, I hooked it with my own and led her to the truck. After grabbing two mega coffees, we started exploring, and to my ever-loving surprise, I didn’t absolutely hate Times Square. I’d never want to come here again, but she was right. Everyone who visited the city had to see it and I was sure her plan of contrasting it to other places she was going to take me would be effective.

This was the worst of it, and if I didn’t hate it, she was hoping I would start coming around. As I thought it, she glanced up at me with a glimmer of knowing in her eyes. “You’re realizing that it’s not so bad after all, aren’t you?”

“I am, but there’s a lot more to it than that.”

She nodded, then flashed me a happy smile. “Realizing that it’s not so bad is the first step to realizing that you might actually be able to live here. I’m chalking it up as a win. Next stop, Wall Street. We’re getting a picture of you cupping that bull’s balls.”

I laughed. “Does it even have balls?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “I haven’t seen it very many times, and when I have, I didn’t check out its genitalia, but I wanted to make you laugh and it worked, so that’s another win.”

We spent the day doing all the typical things any tourist here would do. She took me to Wall Street, the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, and the World Trade Center Memorial and Museum. We grabbed lunch at Central Park and drove across the Brooklyn Bridge.

All the while, Rainey acted like my tour guide, seemingly hellbent on making me laugh every chance that she got—and she got a lot of chances. By the time she took me back to my hotel, I had to admit that I'd had a good time with her.

“Thank you for showing me around, Rainey. It was fun.”

“Fun enough to stay here?” she asked hopefully, her eyes round as she stared at me from behind her steering wheel.

I shrugged. “Fun enough to consider it. How about coming up to my suite for a drink? I need to decompress a little. I really did have a great time, but fuck. This place is massively overwhelming.”

She chuckled. “We did also pack several days' worth of tourist attractions into one day. I figured you might want to get it done so we could start exploring the real New York tomorrow. Today was overwhelming even for me, and I've been living here a long time now.”

“So about that drink, then.” I let the statement hang between us, not pushing her but really hoping she said yes. “I know you have to get home to Jenna, but we could make it a quick one.”

After checking the time on the clock on her dashboard, she nodded and veered toward the hotel's parking lot. “I've got a little bit before I have to be home. She's got a guitar lesson starting in an hour anyway, which means she won't even be there by the time I arrive if I leave now.”

“She takes guitar lessons?” I asked.

Rainey froze but then nodded and kept her eyes on the road as she waited for a gap to get into the right lane. “She does.”

“Cool. That's another thing aside from being troublemakers that we've got in common. Let me know if she ever wants a lesson from a professional. I know some people I could hook her up with.”

“I thought for sure you were going to offer to give her tips yourself.”

I laughed. “No, I’m a professional writer, not a guitarist. Besides, I’m only here for a week, remember?”

“I remember,” she said thoughtfully. “How can I forget? Our time together has an expiration date and it’s coming up fast unless you decide to move here.”

“It’s not an expiration date.” I scoffed. “Regardless of what I decide, we could keep in touch. You could come visit me in Portland and I could visit here. Or maybe not here. Maybe we could find someplace close by but a little quieter to spend some more time together.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Damn it. I thought we were making progress, but it seems I was wrong.”

“Hey, this is only day one. You’ve got time to sway me.”

“True,” she agreed.

After she navigated us into the parking lot, we found a spot and headed upstairs together. Once we were in my suite, I gestured for her to go ahead to the sitting area while I strode over to the fridge. “What’s it going to be? There are some of those tiny bottles of liquor in here. Wine. Beer. Soda. Sparkling water?”

When I turned to glance at her over my shoulder, my jaw nearly dropped at what I found myself looking at. In the short minute I’d been studying the contents of the fridge, she’d taken off her dress. Standing in front of me in only a matching set of lacy black underwear, she cocked her head and beckoned to me with her finger.

“All I want is you, Jesse.”

Not needing any more than that, I straightened back up and walked right up to her, only stopping when my chest was pressed up against hers. My arms wrapped around her waist while hers looped around my neck. There was no hesitation in either of us. No awkward fumbles when our hands crashed into each other or one of us did the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Instead, it was like we’d choreographed this. Rehearsed it until we had it down to art. As my mouth descended over hers,

I wiped the events of the day from my mind. If it was this good when we were only just getting started, I didn't want to be distracted by anything else.

All she wanted was me, and all I wanted was her. If only it could always be that simple, maybe I wouldn't have been leaving soon. Maybe she never would've left me. If need and want made the world go around, then mine would never stop spinning for the girl.

Unfortunately, life was more complicated than that, but this wasn't. What we had right here and right now was that simple, and neither of us tried to fight it when I walked her slowly back toward the bed. She wanted me and I was willing to give myself to her, and for now, that was all that really mattered.

Jesse's eyes were smoldering on mine when he pulled away from our kiss to watch as he pushed me down on his bed. I lay flat on my back on his mattress, my chest rising and falling fast as he let his gaze roam over me, still standing between my feet at the foot of the bed.

"This is a pleasant surprise," he murmured as he stroked his fingertips along the insides of my calves, his eyes traveling down. Down. Down.

He hadn't even really touched me yet, but I squirmed under the heat of those magnificent eyes and the light touch of those fingers so far away from where I wanted them most.

"As long as it's a pleasant one." My voice came out much breathier than usual, but I was so turned on I could barely think. I'd seen the look in his eyes when he'd invited me up here. Whether he'd even been aware of it, I didn't know, but I'd known *him* for long enough to recognize those flames that had started to flicker behind his eyes.

While my teenage years were long gone, my body's response to him looking at me that way had remained unchanged. Almost instantly, my nipples had peaked and my panties had grown damp, an ache I knew only he could soothe starting to build deep inside of me.

He kept looking but not really touching, running those fingertips up higher and higher on each pass but staying well away from the apex of my thighs.

I let out a needy moan. "Jesse."

“I’m right here, baby,” he murmured reassuringly before finally lifting his eyes back to mine. “Not that I have any objections, but where did this come from?”

“You.” I stared right back at him. “You gave me *the look* in the car, and I know that wasn’t very long ago, but shit. It feels like forever right now.”

“I gave you the look?” He smirked, gaze holding mine. He slid out of his jacket and started unbuttoning his shirt. “If by that, you mean a look that tells you I want you, I’m pretty sure I’m always giving you that look.”

As his fingers worked on the buttons, my gaze dropped to them, following them as they moved toward the waistband of his jeans and the giant bulge beneath the denim. My breathing sped up and I licked my lips, only glancing back up at him when I heard him release a low groan.

“While we’re speaking about looks, if you keep looking at my crotch like that, this is going to be over before it even starts.”

Another rush of heat sped through me. “Seriously? Just from looking at you? Or do you mean that more metaphorically?”

He gave me a little shrug, that sexy, confident smirk still on his lips, doing all kinds of things to me. “I don’t know. It doesn’t feel like I mean it metaphorically. Want to give it a try?”

“Not today.” The words tumbled out of me unbidden. I sat up to reach for his waistband, intent on helping him because he was going way too damn slow for my liking. “Please, Jesse. I need you.”

Another groan rumbled from his chest before the mattress dipped between my legs as he placed his knees in the empty space there. Quickly wrapping his fingers around my hips, he lifted me up and moved me a bit higher. Then he hooked his thumbs into the elastic of my panties and rolled them off.

Without the fabric between us, I was on full display to him at this angle, but I didn’t feel any humiliation or shame. I

knew how slick and shiny I was, but it was all for him and he knew it. That wasn't anything to be ashamed about.

Jesse's lids got heavy as he looked at me, and his eyes were narrowed to slits when he glanced back up. "Stop me if I do anything you don't want me to do."

With that, he dropped his head and went to work, giving me long, deliberate licks that had me shaking in no time. Teasing me a little, he toyed at my entrance with his fingers and chuckled when my hips bucked.

"Fuck, Rainey. You're so damn sexy. How is that possible after you carried around a baby for nine months?"

"It's closer to ten, and don't talk about that right now," I ground out between clenched teeth when his tongue flicked at my clit. "How long do you plan on playing with me like this?"

"As long as I want." He hummed against me, and sparks of pleasure trickled through my veins. "Actually, that depends on how much time you've got."

My hips bucked again. "About two hours."

"I can work with that." Flexing his fingers on my hips, he held me down and he tucked back into me, turning those sparks of pleasure into waves in no time.

My orgasm ripped through me in a blaze of heat, leaving me whimpering and shaking on the mattress underneath me. When I came to again, I expected him to stop but he didn't. Instead, he simply slowed down before eventually picking up his pace again.

"So good," I mumbled almost drunkenly, intoxicated by the hormones, and the endorphins, and the pure, unadulterated pleasure. "So good, baby. Yes, Jesse. Yes!"

I came again, a lot more unexpectedly this time, but the climax was no less powerful than the first. By the time it started subsiding, I was crazy with need for him all over again when I saw the desperate look on his face where he hovered above me.

Longish hair hanging around the sides of his handsome face, framing it so beautifully that I almost cried, he moved into position. “I need you now, baby. Okay?”

I nodded, too out of it to do much more than wrap my legs around his hips and pull him into me. I was so wet and so ready that there was almost no resistance as he buried himself deep inside me.

He held himself up on his strong arms, but I saw them trembling as he moved in and out of me slowly at first. Jaw tight with strain, his biceps tensed and released, his shoulders tight where I clung to him.

“Move for me, baby. I’m okay,” I murmured soothingly, keeping one hand around his neck while cupping his face in the other and bringing it closer to give him a hard, fast kiss. “Let me feel how much you want me. Please?”

He groaned, dropping his forehead to mine before stilling his hips completely. “I don’t want to hurt you, Rainey. I never want to hurt you.”

“And you won’t,” I assured him. “Stop holding back on me. I promise to tell you if you’re hurting me, but you won’t.”

“You’re so tight,” he bit out between clenched teeth. “I feel like I could hurt you so fucking easily.”

“You won’t,” I repeated, still holding his face as I kissed him and bucked my hips up into him. “I’m not as fragile as I look. Or feel.”

“Okay,” he murmured, then let loose and moved in a way I’d never felt before.

His thrusts were so hard that they were almost punishing, but I was here for it. There was a wild look in his eyes that I loved seeing there. It catapulted me back to the edge before I even knew what was happening.

When my insides tightened around him, he let out a loud moan and somehow, impossibly, started moving even faster. His features contorted in a mask of pleasure as he moved in and out of me like an Olympic sprinter who was at the front of

the race and was so close to the finish line that he could taste the glory.

To my surprise, I managed to keep up with him. Clinging to him, I matched him thrust for thrust, feeling another orgasm building deep down inside me. What was coming felt so big that it might just blow me apart, but man. *What a way to go.*

With one final thrust, I felt his stomach dipping against mine. Then his movements became choppy and he roared my name, emptying himself into the condom and sending me careening right into the best orgasm I'd ever had.

I already knew there would be no recovering from this. Jesse had ruined me for other men a long time ago, but this right here? This was the moment that I finally realized it would last forever. It would never get better than this. There would never be anyone else who could make me feel this way.

As I lay there panting in the aftermath, Jesse collapsed on top me, pressing me into the mattress with his delicious weight, but I didn't care. I didn't care about anything but his heart beating against mine or the way his arms felt as he held me.

Perhaps an eternity passed before he finally lifted his head, giving me the sweetest smile I'd ever seen before he kissed me. "I've got to go take care of the condom, but I'll be right back. Stay here."

I nodded lazily, my entire body languid and sated. "I'm not going anywhere. Trust me."

He chuckled, smacking the side of my ass. He rolled off me and sat up on the side of the bed. As I watched him removing the condom, I realized I hadn't even known he'd put one on. "When did you have time to do that?"

"Do what, get the condom?" he asked as he got up and strode over to the bathroom. "I can't really remember. I know I had it in my wallet but I'm not entirely sure when I put it on."

I giggled. "Good to know that you're as crazy for me as I am for you."

Turning to come back to bed, he smirked at me and didn't stop until he was crawling over me again. He laid a deep kiss on me before reluctantly moving his lips away from mine. "I'm so fucking crazy for you. Every damn time. I don't know what you do to me, Rainey Hollenbeck, but I do know that I like it. Ready for more?"

With his warm skin against mine and his mouth giving me these soft, sleepy kisses that I was sure would soon lead to more, I hated myself for having to do it, but I had to go. "I would've been so ready for more soon, but I can't. I need to get going."

Groaning, he dropped his forehead back to mine and held it there for a beat before checking the watch on his wrist. "Shit, you're right. I didn't realize how much time had passed. Okay, just give me a minute."

He collapsed beside me this time, pulling me close and just holding me there for the minute he'd requested. When it was up, he murmured against my skin. "I wish you could've stayed the night."

"So do I," I said honestly. "That's not an option for me, though. Not ever, really, but especially not today. I have a rebellious pre-teen waiting for me at home."

"I know. I understand. I just hate that you have to go."

"Agreed," I murmured before turning in the circle of his arms and giving him another soft kiss. "I'll see you soon, okay?"

"You bet." Leaving him behind in bed, I got up and got dressed. Then I blew him a kiss and got out of there before I changed my mind. I wanted nothing more than to stay with him. Not just for the sex, but for the laughter and the cuddles, the talking and the prospect of learning more about him, but I couldn't stay.

I really did have a rebellious pre-teen to deal with, and I had to go home to ground her. Jenna was going to hate me for it, and I hated myself for it too, but that was motherhood.

Somewhere along the line, though, I'd have to sneak it in there that I was proud of her for standing up for her friend. Jesse had reminded me today of who we used to be, and I couldn't blame Jenna for having inherited those traits from us.

Violence still wasn't the answer, but damn if it didn't feel good to punch a jerk who deserved it sometimes.

I woke up to my phone buzzing on my nightstand. Groaning, I reached for it and tipped it to the side to check the screen. When I saw who it was, though, I smiled instead of killing it and pressed the phone to my ear.

“Hey, Rainey. Don’t tell me you’re here already. I’ve literally just opened my eyes.”

She laughed softly. “You have no idea how jealous I am that you’re still sleeping, but no. I’m not there. I, uh, I’m actually going to have to take a raincheck on showing you around today.”

“You are?” I frowned, disappointment blooming in my gut. “Why?”

“I’m taking Jenna out to talk about yesterday. We started talking about it last night, but things went sideways. My mother was there and—”

“Say no more. I get it.” Sure, I was disappointed, but her daughter came first. I understood that. If Jenna was mine, I definitely would’ve made her my number one priority. “I’ll just go do some more sightseeing today and then we’ll meet up again tomorrow?”

“Thanks so much for understanding,” she said, the relief in her voice almost palpable. “I would’ve said that I’d meet you after I talk to her, but I don’t know how long it’s going to take and I don’t want to make her feel like I’ve got somewhere else I need to be.”

“No, definitely not. Relax, Rainey. I don’t mind taking a look around by myself. It might even be good for me to have to find my own way around.”

“Yeah, okay. Just don’t make any decisions about the place while I’m not there to chaperone. Do we have a deal?”

“Nope, I’m not making any promises,” I joked. “No deal.”

She huffed a pretend, exaggerated breath and then giggled. “Try to have some fun today, will you?”

“Sure, but it would’ve been more fun if you were here with me right now.” That was all it took for my cock to turn to stone. I was still naked from last night and in a bed that still smelled like sex, her, and sex with her. “Are you alone?”

“No, uh, I’m not,” she said, sounding flustered. “I’m actually at the office at the moment. I had to come drop off some paperwork before I can go pick up Jenna. My assistant is with me.”

“Damn it,” I muttered. “Too bad. You got a door on that office of yours?”

“Yes, but I don’t have time right now to—”

“Close it,” I insisted, wrapping my fist around my dick. “I promise I’ll make it quick, and so, so good.”

There were some muffled noises in the background. Then her voice came down the line clear again. “Okay, my door is closed, but only so that I can have some privacy while I say no.”

“Do you want to know what I’m doing at this very moment?” I asked as I stroked slowly up and down. “I still have your scent on me, you know.”

Her breathing grew slightly heavier, but then she chuckled. “I really can’t do this, Jesse. Don’t get me wrong, I want to, but I can’t.”

“Fine,” I groaned. “Leave me hanging. Or hard, as the case may be, but you’re going to have to make it up to me sometime.”

“Absolutely,” she agreed without any hesitation whatsoever. “I have to go, though. I’ll talk to you later. I can’t wait to hear about your day.”

After I hung up, I tossed my phone down on my bed and breathed out. Rainey leaving or telling me that she had to go was turning into the story of my life.

Now what the hell am I supposed to do with you? I glanced down at my cock, then remembered that I didn’t need her for this part.

It really would’ve been more fun if she’d been here, but since she couldn’t be, I’d have to do it by myself. Once I was done, I got up and grabbed a long shower, thinking about her and the conversations we’d had since I’d arrived.

She’d made it seem like New York was such a great place to live that she had no doubt it would win me over at some point, but after just walking around aimlessly for a few hours, I still didn’t understand the hype. I hopped on the subway and got off at random stop, but it didn’t matter so much where I went—it all felt the same to me.

There were open sewers everywhere and the scent of garbage and frying oil mingling in the air. The people rushed past me, no one sparing me a second glance even if they bumped into me. Construction crews littered the city, scaffolding putting people into what felt like cattle chutes to me and the noise of traffic and buildings in the making deafening.

Rainey is wrong. This place is miserable. Every last inch of it. I didn’t even want to think about how much trouble I would have creating new songs with all the noise here.

She’d promised me that there were quieter places, but so far, I hadn’t managed to find one. After accidentally climbing aboard the wrong train, I ended up on the other side of the city, and as I made my way back, I made an effort to check out a few of the spots that were further afield.

Some were marginally better than others, but none of them really spoke to me. I just couldn’t envision creating here, and

while I knew that a lot of people did, I simply didn't know how. It was noisy as fuck and dirty as hell. It reeked of sewage and desperation no matter where I went, and honestly, the people out here weren't any better either.

Coming from me, that was definitely saying something. I wasn't a people person, clearly, but shit, there was such a thing as basic manners. Everyone here seemed to have skipped right over that part.

Rainey had mentioned that I didn't have to live in the city itself to take their offer. Since I had some time on my hands, I decided to go check out the suburbs. After visiting one or two, I realized that wasn't going to work for me either.

They were all like these self-contained villages with a small-town vibe to them that made me feel like I'd stepped back in time—to my hometown. Living here would be like moving backward, and I definitely didn't want that.

Thinking it over as I stepped into a trendy bistro in—wherever the hell I was right now—I ordered a coffee and sandwich. It cost me more than double what it did at my local place in Portland, and it didn't even taste half as good.

While I'd made the trip to spend time with Rainey and not necessarily to genuinely consider moving here, I was still a little disappointed. More so that she wouldn't consider moving to Portland with me. As far as I could tell, there was no way I could live here.

A part of me, a small one, sure, but a part nonetheless, had been hoping that New York City would redeem itself. If it had just done that, then maybe I could've given it some real thought, but it was a melting pot of misery I wanted no part of.

I wasn't about to give up, though. I had a few more days left here and, to be fair, quite a lot more exploring to do. After I finished my sandwich, I pulled my phone out of my pocket, reaching out to the one person who might be able to put things in perspective for me.

Callum answered on the third ring. “Well, well, well, Mr. Manhattan finally remembered his friend back home, huh?”

“You can’t be missing me that much already. I’ve only been gone a few days. How’s it going?”

He laughed. “I’m still doing maintenance. How do you think it’s going? Hey, do you think that apartment that was opening up in your building is still available?”

“I don’t know, but I do know you’re not serious, so I’m not going to put in a call about it.” I grinned. “Besides, doing maintenance on the ranch is better than being where I am right now. Seriously, bro. This place sucks. Big time. I have no idea why people make such a huge fuss about it.”

“Neither do I,” he agreed. “Upstate ain’t so bad, but the city? No thank you. It’ll eat you alive and then pick its teeth with your bones.”

“That’s only after someone finally realizes you’re missing,” I said. “That’s likely to take a few years around here. I don’t think these people know what it means to form human connections.”

“That’s rich coming from you.”

I laughed. “I know, but it’s true. I think people would step over a dead body lying in the streets here and no one would even call the cops.”

He paused. “If it’s really that bad, why aren’t you home yet?”

“I’m visiting Gravity’s headquarters tomorrow. I haven’t been there yet and I’m looking forward to seeing the actual place where I would be working. Rainey said I wouldn’t have to be there all the time, so I guess I could look into living farther out than I’ve traveled so far.”

“Rainey’s showing you around, then?” he asked. “How’s that been going?”

“Real good.” A softer grin than the one I usually used when I grinned at all started forming on my lips as I spoke about her. “She’s the only thing tempting me about moving here. The only thing is that she’s always so damn busy that I doubt I’d get to see much of her.”

He made a sympathetic noise in the back of his throat. “Sorry, brother. I hate to say it, but if I were you, I’d get packing. It doesn’t mean you have to say goodbye to your girl forever. You could try to make long distance work. Have you ever heard of phone sex? It’s fucking great once you get into it.”

“*If* you get into it,” I said. “As it turns out, she’s too busy for even that.”

He let out a whistle between his teeth. “Okay, well then get packing, come home, and we’ll find you a nice girl who’ll talk dirty to you over the phone all day long if that’s what you want.”

I barked out a laugh. “That’s not what I want. I just tried it this morning because she wasn’t around, and she turned me down. After learning what I have about what she’s got going on here, I can’t say I blame her. I really do understand. I just don’t think moving here would get me a whole lot of face time with her.”

“It could happen that she’ll schedule you in more regularly if she knows for a fact that you’re staying. At the moment, you’re passing through and that makes you a risk. Phone sex or no, nobody wants to fall for someone who lives that far away from them.”

“True, but I don’t think that’s what it’s about. Her life is just full up at the moment. Either way, I’m not giving up. I’m having a great time with her, and when we go check out Gravity’s offices tomorrow, something might click for me.”

“I hope it doesn’t, but I also hope it does. I know that makes no sense, but it’s how I feel. I want you to get your happily ever after with her if that’s what you want. I also want your career to go the way you said it would if you sign with Gravity, but I also want you to come home and live closer to me. It’s confusing being me.”

“It really is,” I agreed. “Don’t worry, though, it’s pretty confusing being me right now, too.”

I rubbed the back of my head, and I looked at the busy street with images of Rainey swirling in the back of my mind. “I honestly have no idea what I want. All that I know is that it still doesn’t feel quite done yet.”

“Well, get it done and get your ass back here before that city seduces you.” He let out a string of curses. “I’ve got to go. I just stabbed my palm on a rusty old wire. Bye, Jesse. Come home soon.”

I winced. “Good luck with the stab wound. Talk to you later, buddy.”

After sliding my phone back into my pocket, I picked up what was left of my coffee and walked out onto the sidewalk. A music store on the other side of the road caught my attention, and I perked up. Spoiling myself with a new guitar always made me feel better.

I hadn’t even started crossing the street yet, but as I’d stepped off the sidewalk, a car racing around the corner honked at me, cutting off my thoughts and leaving them dead in their tracks. When the occupant stuck his hand out the window and gave me the finger as he broke the speed limit for sure, I shook my head.

Yeah, I’m not staying here.

Like Callum had said, there was always phone sex. If Rainey could even schedule me in for that, but either way, I wasn’t living here. Being with her was spectacular, but nothing short of a miracle would make it worth my while to move here. That was for damn sure.

The phone call with Jesse had left me hot and bothered. I really needed to get home to pick Jenna up, but as I sat behind my desk and squeezed my thighs together, I realized that I also just needed a minute to get my head back online and my body calmed down.

As I sat there thinking about what he might be doing at this very moment, I wished I could've indulged his request. We'd tried phone sex a few times as teens, but we'd always been too afraid of being overheard by our parents for it to have been anything more than a few quietly muttered words before we'd hang up.

I'd missed out on so much with him because of my parents bringing me here. He'd been so sweet with Jenna yesterday that I now knew for sure that he'd be a great dad. I'd always had my suspicions, but now that I'd seen him in action, leaping to a perfect stranger's defense, I knew it with my whole heart.

Jesse would've been a fantastic father to Jenna, and she'd have adored having him in her life. My hormones wore off as I thought about that side of things. Riddled with guilt and angry with my parents about it for the first time in years, I finally left the office and headed home.

What I walked in on definitely didn't soften my feelings toward my mother. She was standing in front of Jenna in the kitchen, her face red and her palms splayed on the granite counter as she ripped into my daughter.

“It’s just so irresponsible, Jenna. Incidents like this one might make it to your academic record, and then what will happen when it’s time to start applying to colleges? You’re not this stupid, girl. Why would you risk your entire future to punch some other child?”

She didn’t give Jenna the opportunity to respond. As she opened her mouth again, I stepped in and went to join Jenna on her side of the counter, making it obvious who I would be supporting in this argument. “I told you this morning that I would handle this today, Mom.”

“Yes, you did, but then you went racing off to work like always and left me to deal with this delinquent. What she needs isn’t a day out with Mom dearest. She needs to be grounded for six months and to have her phone and privileges taken away.”

“She’s already grounded—”

“For a week?” my mom’s voice rose several octaves. “That’s ridiculous, Rainey. A week won’t teach her a thing. They think the boy’s nose might be cracked.”

“Cracked noses build character,” I said dryly. “Maybe it will make him think twice about being a bully again.”

My mom’s face grew even redder. “You *would* say that. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, does it? Did you put her up to this? If so, you should know that you’re playing with fire. With her very future.”

“No, Mom. Of course, I didn’t put her up to it, but I am proud of her for standing up for her friend. Would I have preferred it if she’d done it with words instead of her fist? Sure, but in the heat of the moment, none of us make the best decisions all the time.”

Mom’s hands flew to her hips. “How do you think a suspension at such a young age is going to go over with any college worth going to?”

“It’s not a formal suspension, Mother. I’ve already explained this to you. She was given two days off as a warning. If she does it again, then they’ll consider a formal

suspension. The friend she was standing up for came forward with the full story, and the principal even called to tell me she could've gone back today, but I wanted to speak with her first."

Mom's eyes rolled. "Speaking doesn't resolve these kinds of behavior problems. You need to take a firm hand with her. Honestly, I don't know what I was expecting. This type of delinquency is in her DNA."

I narrowed my eyes in a glare as I put my hand on Jenna's back. "If you call my daughter a delinquent one more time, we'll get out of your hair. Permanently. You will never have to deal with her or me ever again. You've had the chance to raise your daughter, and now it's my turn to raise mine. Come on, baby. We're leaving."

Jenna marched out of the kitchen ahead of me, then spun around to toss her arms around my neck as soon as we were out of my mother's earshot. "That was awesome, Mom. Thank you."

"You're welcome, honey, but we really do need to talk. I meant what I said in there. I really am proud of you for standing up for your friend when she was bullied, but punching that kid wasn't the right thing to do."

She pouted. "I already know that. I shouldn't have punched him and it won't happen again, but he was being so mean to her, Mom. If you heard the things he was saying, you would've punched him too."

"I'm sure I would've, and I'd love to hear what he was saying that was so bad, but we need to get out of here. Grandma will be back any minute for round two of that fight and I just don't have it in me this morning."

"When are we moving out again?" she asked as we walked out the door together. "I know you're saving up for a nice house and I know that Grandma helps us out a lot, but I swear, she's getting worse."

I nodded my agreement. "It's not all bad, is it? Besides, we can't just leave her. Even I also think she's getting worse. I'll

talk to her about it sometime. I'm sure she's just worried about both of us."

Jenna snorted. "She's not worried. She's overbearing and unable to accept that she can't control both of our lives."

"Don't talk about her that way, sweetheart. She's still your grandmother and like I said, it's not all bad. You guys have fun together when you're cooking sometimes."

"Whatever." Jenna shrugged as she dropped into her seat in the car. After buckling up, she let out a deep, long sigh. "Are you still mad at me? You don't seem so mad at me anymore."

"That's because I'm not. I got some sense knocked into me and I realized that while we do need to work on your reactions, there's also something to be said about your character for standing up for a friend that way."

"Thank you," she said softly. "I was pretty proud of myself, too. For a second, anyway."

I reached out and patted her leg before withdrawing and putting my hand back on the steering wheel. "Don't doubt those instincts of yours, my love. Protecting those we love is a very important quality. Maybe just try not to make someone literally bleed for it next time."

"Okay, Mom." She settled back in her seat and smiled before she gave me a curious look. "Who knocked the sense into you? Was it that guy you were with yesterday? He was nice. I liked him."

"You would've liked him, considering that he had your back even when he should've been staying out of it."

Her smile widened. "He's a rebel, too, obviously. So who was he? Am I going to see him again?"

"No, baby. I don't think so. He's that songwriter who's in town for the week. Do you remember the one I told you about?"

"Oh, right. The guy you went to Portland to sign?"

“That’s the one,” I said. “I don’t even know if he’s going to accept our offer, but even if he does, I don’t think he’s going to be hanging around with us. He’ll be too busy with work and becoming a billionaire.”

“Does songwriting really make you that much money?”

I tipped my head from side to side. “For a precious few, incredibly talented people, yes. It can. Unfortunately, this particular songwriter is already doing extremely well for himself. I’m not sure the promise of that kind of money is going to convince him to move here.”

“If he doesn’t, you don’t get your promotion, do you?” She smacked the back of her head against the seat in frustration. “Darn. That would suck. You said we could definitely move out if you get this promotion.”

“I might still get it,” I said. “It depends on whether Max feels like I did a good enough job to recruit him regardless of him not signing with us ultimately. If he turns us down only because of the location, then I could still be considered for the promotion.”

“Well, I really hope he says yes. We need to get our own place, Mom.”

“I hear you, and one day, we will. Let’s talk about you now, though. I know that you were trying to do the right thing at school, but I’m going to need you to be honest with me about what happened.”

“Will you answer one question for me before I tell you?”

I considered it before lowering my chin in a nod. “Sure, what would you like to know?”

“What did Grandma mean when she said the apple didn’t fall far from the tree?” she asked.

I sighed, but I’d known as soon as my mother had said it that I would have to explain. “What she meant was that you’re more like me than she would’ve liked. Back in the tenth grade, I punched a girl for being mean to my friend.”

“Whoa, Mom. That’s awesome!” She raised her hand for a high five, but I shook my head.

“No, it’s nothing to celebrate. The girl was being a jerk and we’d been getting into it for a while. She also happened to like a good friend of mine at the time who became my boyfriend after that summer. Because she knew that he liked me, she made a point of pushing my buttons and being absolutely awful to my friend, who made a much softer target than me.”

“Did you really punch her?”

“I did.” Even though I knew I shouldn’t, I still grinned at the memory. “It was so wrong, but it felt so good.”

“Tell me about it,” she muttered brightly as we parked at the zoo. Then she frowned at me. “Seriously, Mom? You know I’m not eight anymore, right?”

“Yep, but neither am I and I still love coming here, so here we are. Being around animals is nice. It’s calming.”

“Yeah, okay.” Surprisingly, she didn’t argue about me bringing her here. Instead, she fell into step beside me after I paid for our entry and smiled. “Is that also what Grandma meant when she said that being a delinquent is in my DNA?”

Since I’d known this question was coming too, I was prepared for it. Prepared and all lied out for this week. “No, she was referring to your father when she said that. For the record, he wasn’t a delinquent. He just didn’t take longer than me to get ready and his parents didn’t belong to the country club.”

Her jaw nearly dropped when I said it. “Is that true? You never told me that before. Also, does that mean I can actually start asking questions about him now and you’ll answer them?”

“I’ve always answered them.”

She snorted. “Barely, Mom. You’ve been so vague that I still don’t really know anything about him.”

“Okay, let’s make a deal,” I said. “You can ask me anything you want about him, but it stays between us. If

Grandma finds out we've been talking about this, we're dead meat."

Which was the reason why I'd always been so vague in the past. Jenna was entitled to her answers now, though. Since her relationship with my mother was so rocky at the moment, I also felt pretty sure that she wouldn't let it slip to Mom.

Jenna was practically bouncing beside me now, but then she seemed to realize something sad and her footsteps returned to normal. "Okay, first question. Did you love him?"

"Yes. Very much."

"Why isn't he with us, then? Is it because Grandma didn't like him just because he didn't belong to the country club?"

"To a certain extent," I admitted. "It was a little more complicated than that, though. You know how old I was when I got pregnant with you. You also know that's why Grandma is so hard on you. She's trying to keep you from making the mistakes I made. In her eyes, obviously. I've never thought getting pregnant with you was a mistake. I loved you from the word go, and while we weren't planning for it to happen, I'm sure he would've loved you just as much as I did."

"Is he nice?"

I nodded, feeling the smile curling my lips. "A lot of people wouldn't agree with me about this at all, but he was always very nice to me. He was just *prickly*."

"Sort of like me?" she asked, her eyes wide. "I guess that explains things."

I chuckled and slipped my arm around her shoulders, pulling her into me while we walked. "If your dad and I had any money at the time, things might've worked out differently, but that's not your fault. Never doubt that. It's not your fault or his that he's not here."

She mulled it over for a beat before she glanced at me again. "If that's true, am I ever going to meet him?"

"You already have, baby."

Slamming to a stop, she stared at me with awe and incredulity in her eyes. “I have? Who is he? When did I meet him?”

“It’s not important because he’s still not in our lives now and he never will be. I’m sorry, kiddo, but you’re stuck with me.”

Wondering if I’d already said too much, I changed the topic back to the altercation she’d had at school. All day long, I wondered how Jesse would’ve handled this, though. I wondered what he might’ve said and then I checked her knuckles like he’d suggested, and while nothing was broken or damaged, I was glad I’d taken the time to do it. It felt like it had brought us closer, and at the end of the day, I had yet another thing to be grateful to him for.

Damn it, Jesse. Why can’t things just ever have been easy for us?

“Thanks, man,” I said as I tipped the guy who’d brought up the room service breakfast I’d ordered. He grinned at me and nodded his appreciation after leaving the cart, then left just as Rainey appeared in the doorway.

“Good morning,” she said cheerfully, giving me a smile that lit up the room. Wearing a sunshine yellow shift dress and that smile, she made me feel warm when she passed me as she slid inside, holding her sunglasses in her hand.

“What’s this?” she asked when she spotted the cart, her brows tugging together as she turned to look at me. “You don’t want to go out for breakfast?”

“Nah, I’m good here. This room is my safe space in the city and I did so much exploring yesterday that I’m not quite ready to leave again yet.”

“Oh. Okay.” She seemed taken aback for a moment but then rallied. Drawing in a breath, she smiled again and relaxed a little as she looked around. “I understand why you wouldn’t want to leave. This is a nice suite.”

I walked to the small dining table near where she was standing and pulled out a chair for her. “It is a nice suite, but it’s also as quiet as it gets around here.”

She lowered her head to one side as she sat down, exhaling slowly, her eyes on mine. “I take it yesterday didn’t go well?”

I shrugged and walked around the table to my own seat before pulling the cart closer. “It’s not that it didn’t go well.

New York is just really noisy and really busy. I made a point of visiting as many places as I could, and I didn't find anywhere I could see myself living."

"Did you go out to the suburbs?"

I nodded. "Too small-town. Some of them gave me distinct Stepford vibes and others are too family-oriented for where I'm at in my life right now."

"Well, I thought that might be the case for the suburbs, but I'm sure there are plenty of areas you haven't seen yet. We may just have to get a little bit creative, but that's what you've got me for. There's also still the commuting option and let's not forget New Jersey. It's possible that you'll find what you're looking for there."

"I'm still keeping an open mind." As much as I could, anyway. "So far, I really am finding it very difficult to imagine myself living here, but that doesn't mean that I'm saying no. I'm looking forward to seeing the offices I'll be working at today."

"Yes." She flashed me another bright smile. "Like I said before, you wouldn't have to be there every day, but if you want to be, we could get you your own studio to work from in the building. We've got a few available that you might like. I think you're going to love our offices. They're great and the workplace culture is cutthroat, but also light and fun most of the time."

"Cutthroat, light, and fun?" I mused, arching a brow at her. "That seems like an unlikely combination, but I'll keep that in mind."

She chuckled. "You wouldn't be getting the cutthroat part. No one would be competing with you, remember? You'd be our resident rock star who will be sought after and revered."

Both of my brows quirked this time. "Sought after, revered, resident songwriter, huh? You sure do drive a hard bargain, but you may be overselling it a little."

Raising her hand, she placed her forefinger about a hair's breadth away from her thumb. "If I am, it's only by about this

much. Seriously, the people at Gravity are going to love you. We need someone like you desperately. You know how artists are. So sensitive. One wrong word about them online, and suddenly, everyone's all blocked up."

I laughed softly. "Far be it from me to play devil's advocate, but it's rarely only one wrong word. Far more often, it's a shit storm trashing their music, their character, and every choice they've ever made. I'm pretty sure I'd get blocked up, too."

She waved me off. "Thankfully, you'll never know. Unless you've decided to take the stage? Because let me tell you, I could rep the crap out of a talent like yours as a performer."

"No, thank you. I don't care for the idea of having shit storms brewing about me online. I'm also not particularly interested in living in front of the cameras or having people chase me down the street for my autograph. It's just not me."

"That would only happen if you made it huge. Do you think you'd make it huge?" she teased. "Lower-level talent doesn't have to deal with all that stuff all the time."

"Are you calling me lower-level talent?" I joked, clutching my chest in mock offense. "Why don't you tell me how you really feel?"

She laughed. "How I really feel is that you could make it huge, but I'd never pressure you to go for it. You're right about it just not being you and you're already living your dream, making mountains of money off doing what you love. That's the best anyone can really ask for, right?"

"Absolutely." I turned toward the cart before our food went ice cold, lifting the cloches off the dishes I'd ordered and then motioning for Rainey to go ahead.

While we ate, she told me about a few neighborhoods she thought I might like better than what I'd seen so far, and I listened but didn't make any promises. Once we were done, she put her purse in her lap before withdrawing her hand to show me a toothbrush.

"Do you mind?"

I let out a soft chuckle. “No, not at all, but why do you have a toothbrush here and what would you have done if we’d gone out for breakfast?”

“I’ve got toothpaste with me, too. And floss. Just in case.” She stood up with her toothbrush still in her hand. “Don’t look at me like that. It’s not weird. We’ve got a big day today and I knew we were having breakfast before we went to the office. The last thing I want to be worried about when we’re meeting with Max is my breath.”

I laughed but followed her to the bathroom and brushed my own teeth in the sink next to the one she was using. I’d done it earlier as well, but I wasn’t a monster. There was no way I could watch her brush her teeth while my toothbrush was right there and not do it, too.

When her gaze met mine in the mirror, she smiled around her toothbrush, flashing me a mouthful of foam before she spit it out. After rinsing her mouth, she beamed at me. “There we go. All ready?”

I spat and rinsed, then dried my mouth on a towel before shaking my head. “Not quite. There’s something I need from you before we go.”

“Oh, yeah? What is it?”

“Glad you asked.” Reaching out, I snagged her wrist between my fingers, tugging her closer and stealing a kiss before she could say anything else.

Giggling against my lips, she kissed me back, melting into my chest just like she always did. I crushed her to me, deepening the kiss as I tangled my fingers in the loose hair at the back of her head.

All I’d wanted from her before we left had been a kiss, but now that it was happening, I changed my mind. We had a bit of time, and if we were late, then we were late. Rainey was here now and we were spending the day together.

I wasn’t going to let the opportunity to have her all to myself pass me by. As I walked her back into the room, we crashed into a freestanding lamp but I grabbed it before it fell

over. Rainey giggled again, breaking the kiss for a moment to look into my eyes.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” she breathed, her pupils dilated and her lips already swollen from the force of our kisses. “If we keep it up, we’re definitely going to be late and I wanted to show you around before the meeting.”

“Show me around *after* the meeting,” I countered, glancing at the lamp to make sure it was stable before I started moving again.

Rainey let out a shout of playful laughter when she nearly lost her footing, then clung onto me when I lifted her clear off her feet before tossing her on the bed. Seeing her there, her blonde hair splayed out like a golden halo around her head while she was wearing that dress that made her look like a ray of sunshine, got me hard as hell.

“You left me hanging yesterday,” I reminded her as I reached for the top button of my shirt and slid it through the hole. “Didn’t you say you would make it up to me?”

“Sure I did, and I meant it, but I didn’t think you’d cash in when we have someplace to be.”

I finished with all my buttons and let the shirt drop to the floor, smirking when I noticed her gaze lower slowly to drink me in. “You always have someplace to be, Rainey. That’s never going to change and I’m not going to try to make it happen, but it also means that I’m going to take my shot whenever I see a chance to shoot it.”

Her eyes took on a far-away gleam for a moment. When she refocused, she reached for me and I went, resting my weight on my forearms beside her head as I let my face hover above her. She twined her fingers into my hair and wrapped her legs around my hips.

“I don’t mean to make it seem like I’ve always got someplace to be,” she murmured. “Honestly, every time I have to leave you, I wish I could stay.”

I planted a hard kiss on her lips. “I know, and I also know you don’t want to make it seem that way, but it doesn’t just

seem that way. It is that way, and I get it. You're a working, single mother in a high-powered career in one of the most fast-paced cities in the world. I wasn't criticizing you. It's just a fact."

She made a low noise at the back of her throat. "I wish it wasn't, but I guess you're right. It is a fact. Another fact is that we don't have much time, so if you want me to make it up to you, we'd better stop talking and start doing."

I grinned. "Now there's a plan I love."

Laughing, she pushed me off her and pressed at my hip to let me know she wanted me to roll over. Once I was on my back, she climbed on top of me, tucking her hair behind her ears as her lips spread in a coy smile.

"I've got some ideas for how to make it up to you, but you're going to have to keep an eye on the time for me."

"My eyes will be on you, so I've got a better plan." I reached for my phone that was still lying on the nightstand since I hadn't even checked it since I'd gotten up. "I'll set an alarm to go off for, what? Forty minutes before the meeting?"

"Make it fifty. I'll need time to put myself back together and we still need to get there. It's not far, but it'll still take time."

Nodding, I navigated to my alarm and set it, then dropped the phone without looking where it landed. We'd hear it, and if we didn't, that was even better. With the logistics taken care of, I put my hands on her hips and let them roam up her sides and around her back before my fingers hit the metal tab of her zipper.

Eyes on mine, she let me tug it down and pulled her arms free, but then shook her head when I tried to lift it. "Not yet, Mr. Slone. I've got plans for you and they don't involve you turning the tables on me if I get naked too soon."

A groan rumbled deep within my chest as I dropped my hands to my sides and lay back on the pillow. "I like where this is going, but I've got plans of my own, and if we're going to get to it all, we should probably get started."

She smiled, dragging her fingernails lightly across my abdomen before bending over to seal her mouth over my throat. Giving myself over to whatever she had in mind, I let her do her thing, all the while wondering if this would be the last time we'd get to be together.

With her, I never knew, but my trip to New York was about halfway through and I still didn't know what I was going to do. If I turned down the offer from Gravity, I would, in essence, be turning her down too.

At the very least, I wouldn't get to see her very often. As her lips trailed over my skin, I moaned and shut my brain off for the moment. If this was going to be our last time together, I didn't want to miss a damn thing.

Penises were funny things. So unassuming looking, and yet they could bring the greatest pleasure if used properly. As I stared down at Jesse's after patiently removing his shoes, socks, underwear, and pants, I ran my fingertips along the rock-hard, velvety shaft and shivered a little when I remembered the pleasure it had brought me so many times.

If I could've, I'd have made a mold of it to keep with me when he was gone, but I also knew it wouldn't be quite the same without the man it was attached to. Wrapping my fingers around the thick base of him, I swiped my tongue around the head.

Jesse moaned again, hips rocking ever so slightly as he fought to maintain his self-control. Frankly, I knew how hard it was for him since I felt the same way. It was taking everything in me not to just climb astride his lap and ride him like I was a rodeo cowgirl.

I was pretty sure he'd be okay with it if I did, but since I was making it up to him that I'd left him in the lurch yesterday, I wanted to slow things down a little. My entire body protested against the idea, my breasts full and aching, my nipples peaked, and my vagina weeping over the loss of the possibility of more instant gratification.

This wasn't about me, though. Besides, I'd never had the opportunity to explore him this way. Or maybe I had, but he'd always been the one in charge and that meant that I was

usually the one on my back while he got to know all the places that made me squirm and moan.

I didn't know how much time we had left before the alarm was going to go off, but I didn't care. I'd make it good for him even if it meant not getting my own this morning. There was no doubt in my mind that he'd make up for it later if that happened, and even if he didn't, it couldn't be all about me all the time.

Stroking him lightly as I sucked the tip of him into my mouth, I reveled in every soft groan of pleasure that came out of him and in every sign that he was struggling to hold himself back. It all meant that I was finally doing to him what he always did to me, and I freaking loved it.

His hands were on my thighs where I sat between his legs, and every time his fingers tightened on me, I made a note of what I'd done to elicit it. I did the same with the jerking of his cock in my mouth or the tensing of his legs as I went on.

Jesse never teased me for too long, but I didn't feel like I was teasing him. I was trying to find out all the things about him that he already knew about me, but when his stomach muscles tensed and his hand flew up to stop the movement of my wrist as I stroked him fast, I realized that I might've ended up teasing him after all.

"Fuck, Rainey," he groaned. "That feels too good, baby. You're going to have to give me a minute."

My gaze snapped up to his face, and when it did, I saw that his eyes were screwed shut and there was a look of intense concentration on his handsome features. His full lips were parted, and at some point, he'd started shaking a little.

Another rush of heat flooded my panties when I realized how close he was, and I sucked in a sharp breath that made his eyes open and shoot to mine. When he saw whatever expression was on my face, his jaw tightened to the point where he looked furious.

"That's enough," he said in a low, decisive grumble. "Come here."

I frowned, scooting closer to him until my knee brushed the bottom of his balls. He let out another loud groan but then reached for my hand and patted his chest with his free hand. “Sit here.”

My eyes widened, but before I could protest, he gave me a pointed look. “Now, Rainey. You’ve had your fun, and fuck knows, I did too, but I’m dangerously close to exploding and you look like you’ve been subjected to an intense form of torture, so come here.”

A surprised giggle tore out of me, but I followed his command, cupping his face as I stared into his eyes. “Who knew you could be so bossy in bed? I mean, you’re always confident, but I never knew you had such a dirty mouth on you.”

“You think that was dirty talk?” Disbelief shone from his eyes as he looked up at me and I nodded. Immediately, his head started shaking and he snaked a hand around the back of my neck to pull me down, only stopping when my ear was right next to his mouth. “That wasn’t dirty talk, baby. That was simply me making an observation. Dirty talk would be me telling you that I’m about to eat that sweet pussy of yours so good that you’re going to come for me better than you ever have and then, once I’ve licked you clean, I’m going to bury my cock so deep inside you that you’re going to feel me there for a week.”

I whimpered. “Yeah. Okay. I see the difference.”

A sexy little chuckle came from him before he kissed me again. It was hard, fast, and desperate, and then he wrenched his mouth away from mine and patted his chest again. “I’ve got plenty more where that came from, but for now, I’d like to use my mouth for things that are better than talking.”

“I don’t know,” I hedged playfully. “That was pretty good. I’m not sure what could be better than that.”

Huffing out a faux, frustrated breath, he took me by my hips and helped me to where he wanted me, immediately making good on his promise. I held on to his shoulders, my

fingernails probably digging in so hard that they were going to leave marks as he drove me closer and closer to the edge.

When I went flying over it, I screamed his name, not even caring if half the city could hear me. I sagged over, gasping when I felt him pressing his fingers into me as soon as I came down.

“Again,” he insisted when my gaze shot to his. “Give me one more, Rainey. That was so hot.”

“We’re going to be—”

“I don’t give a fuck.” The hard look in his eyes told me he was being dead serious. “Again.”

Although I hated being late, I couldn’t resist Jesse when he was like this. There was also the fact that it gave me a bit of a thrill that this—that I—was more important to him than a meeting with the CEO of one of the biggest talent agencies in the industry.

Logically, I knew he wasn’t choosing me over the job or his work, but it kind of felt like he was. And that made me feel like I was important to him. Much more important than I’d realized before.

Okay, and logical thought doesn’t really matter when he’s touching me like that. My hips started moving into his hand before I’d even decided to stay right where I was, and my head fell back when he brought a fingertip to my clit and began stroking it gently.

Moaning softly, I closed my eyes and reached behind my back until I found that velvety length of his. Leaning back and bracing my other hand on his hip for balance, I knew I was exposing myself to him in a way I never had before, but it didn’t bother me.

When I wrapped my fist around him, he hissed, his eyes locked on my core as he watched his fingers disappearing into me. It was possibly the dirtiest, most erotic situation I’d ever gotten myself into, but I loved it. It was strangely liberating to trust him enough to have gotten into it with him in the first

place. I also felt empowered for being bold enough to follow through instead of trying to change our position.

Stroking him while he did the same to me, I lost track of my thoughts and the time as I surrendered to the blissful sensations he was eliciting from me. At some point, I could've sworn I heard his alarm go off, but I was so out of it, I didn't even think about stopping.

Jesse muttered a few curses and shifted slightly underneath me. Then the sound cut off and he got back to it. Completely absorbed in each other, the sound of our moans mingled in the air until he finally jerked himself out of my grasp and spun almost effortlessly until his face was below mine and his shaft was resting against my slick core.

"Shit. We need a condom," he ground out, planting a quick kiss that tasted like me on my mouth before scooting up in an attempt to reach his pants without leaving the bed.

It didn't work, and I laughed at the agonized sound he made when he realized I was going to have to get off of him. Swinging my leg over his hips, I lay down on the mattress and watched him race to find his wallet.

After hurriedly rolling the condom on, he made himself comfortable on top of me and didn't say a word as he kissed me deeply while pushing his way inside. My arms closed around his neck and head, holding him to me as he took me on the most incredible journey to the stars.

Neither of us lasted long, and as we lay in a sweaty, panting heap on the bed after, I spotted a clock above the bathroom door and my eyes nearly leaped out of my head. "Crap, we've got to go, Jesse. The meeting starts in five minutes."

"Fuck the meeting," he muttered into the crook of my neck, breathing hard as his eyelids fluttered against my skin. "We can tell them I came down with something and can only go in tomorrow."

"No, we can't. I hate it too, but we need to leave."

“Always in such a rush to go,” he murmured, but then pushed himself off me and dropped a kiss on the tip of my nose as humor sparkled deep within those forest greens. “Okay, Rainey. Let’s do it your way today, but if you ever come visit me in Portland again, I’m going to teach you how to slow down.”

“Only if I don’t convince you to move to New York first.” I wagged my brows at him. “Or have you forgotten that I’m trying to sell you on the fast life?”

He groaned as he sat up. “Don’t remind me. Let’s go.”

Smacking my butt when I rolled over to crawl to the edge of the bed, he groaned again. “Shit, now I really don’t want to leave. Don’t tease me with that thing.”

“What, my ass?”

“Yep. All of you, really. Are you sure we can’t cancel this thing?”

I shook my head, bending over to grab my dress and my underwear. “This thing is a big part of why you came here and we’re already going to be so late.”

“Don’t worry,” he said as he put his boxer briefs back on. “I’ll take the blame. I’ll just tell your boss we were having sex. He’ll understand, trust me.”

I gave him a look that was so horrified it made him laugh.

“Stop worrying so much, baby. I’ve got this. I’m talent, remember? I’m not supposed to be on time. Us creative types are just so unreliable. We don’t know how watches work.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” I joked, fixing my hair once I had my clothes on again. As much as I really would’ve preferred just staying here with him all day, we couldn’t, and if we were going to leave, we had to do it now.

Before I decided that I’d rather give his way of life a try after all.

Gravity's offices were situated in a skyscraper right near the center of the action. The streets outside were chaotic, the coffee places and cafés bursting at the seams. Although I was still in a good mood after the way my day had started, I couldn't envision having to come down here on a regular basis.

Today was also the day I had to be honest about it to Rainey and her boss. I didn't want to lead either of them on, and as much as I was having fun with her, I'd have fled back to Portland days ago if it'd been anyone else showing me around.

At this point, pretending that I might actually move here was starting to feel like a sham. Nothing I'd seen so far had even begun to tempt me.

On the other hand, as we walked into the cavernous, modern yet almost cozy lobby of their headquarters, I was pleasantly surprised. Due to our morning delight, Rainey had pushed back our meeting with her boss and was now still going to show me around while we waited for him to finish up with the people he was going to be meeting with after me.

"There's a free coffee station over there," she said, pointing to our left. "You'd think it'd be watered down and gross because it's free, but it's not. It's actually pretty good."

As I followed behind her, she also showed me the break areas, the quiet-time pods—which were fucking awesome—and then we headed down a long hallway toward the studios.

This was where I'd been expecting to be swayed on taking the offer, and the setup they had here didn't disappoint.

"Why do you have studios at a talent agency, anyway?" I asked when we reached the far side of the building from where the majority of the office space on this floor was situated. "Do a lot of your clients come here to record?"

"No, not really." She shrugged, pride shining in her eyes as she opened the door. "We like to be a one-stop shop, though. That means being able to provide as many services as possible right onsite. We also manage a lot of artists and some of them are super paranoid. You've found a safe space in your hotel suite, but to a lot of clients, this is the safest space around."

"I guess that makes sense." I whistled between my teeth when I saw the caliber of the equipment they had just sitting here in case someone wanted to make use of it. "This is insane. Do you know what this stuff costs?"

"Do you know what kind of money our clients bring in?" she countered with a teasing smile on her lips. "To be the best, you have to *have* the best. Of everything. Which is why you're here, too. You're the best at what you do, and if you choose to take our offer, one of these could be yours exclusively."

"Exclusively?" My heart pounded at the thought of having this place—and everything in it—to myself. Also, it was so quiet in here that I would've been able to hear a pin drop. "Finally, someone seems to have understood what proper soundproofing is."

Rainey chuckled. "Like I said, we have the best of everything. Are you more interested yet?"

"Sure, but I think it would get to me that there are no windows anywhere. I mean, I understand that it's better that way from an acoustic and privacy point of view, but your building is made of mirrored glass and even just a small slit would've helped."

She nudged me in the ribs. "At this point, it's starting to sound like you're just coming up with excuses. Now that I've

brought you somewhere awesome and quiet, the view isn't good enough for you."

"What view?" I joked. "I don't see one."

Her nose wrinkled before she laughed. "You do have one. You have a view of all this beautiful equipment. What more could you need?"

"Good point," I conceded. "That is a pretty good view."

When we left the studio, Rainey started taking me around to meet everyone and it surprised the socks off me that they were so excited about it. After she finally managed to pull me away from a group of her coworkers in the break room, she smirked at me. "You're the main attraction here today, and for good reason. But don't worry. If you're here often, they'll stop fawning over you like that but they'll always be friendly."

"Too bad I'm not exactly known for the same thing," I said. "Overly friendly people freak me out. I never know what they want from me."

"Well, in this case, you will know. They want to stay on your good side so that when they need you to help their clients, you'll be willing to make them a priority. Also, don't sell yourself short. I mean, sure, you're not a ray of sunshine, but you're extremely sexy and charismatic. That'll be enough for everyone around here. You don't have to become their best friend."

"Sexy and charismatic, huh?" I bent my knees while we waited for the elevator to speak softly into her ear. "The only person I'm interested in seeing me as either of those things is you. For the record, I think you're pretty sexy and charismatic too."

A pretty pink flush crept up her cheeks just as the elevator doors slid open in front of us. Flashing me a quick, secret smile, she winked before turning to greet the people she knew on the car. I followed her in, then listened to her making small talk with them on our way up.

It brought back so many memories of our time together at school that I ducked my head and smiled. Everywhere she

went, the woman just drew people to her. It was obviously serving her well here, whether she realized it or not.

On the other hand, it was also why she was always so busy. Seeing her here, in her natural habitat, it was obvious that she was a go-to person for advice and since a few of the younger agents asked if she could take the lead on clients they were trying to bring in or had problems with, I was pretty sure that half of her time here was spent simply being a mentor.

When Callum had warned me about not knowing anything about her life here, I hadn't realized just how full it was. Now that I knew, I was more convinced than ever that there was no space for me to become a permanent fixture in it.

Especially not if I wasn't willing to compromise by coming to her. Personally and professionally. Putting those thoughts out of my mind as we got off on the executive floor, I focused on the meeting ahead of us.

Max Astor was a big deal in this industry. I had to have my head in the game when I spoke to him. Even if I wasn't planning on taking his offer, we could still reach an agreement of sorts. I didn't have to be in New York for him to send clients my way, or for them to represent me the way they would any other talent.

I knew they'd approached me on more of an in-house basis, and I also knew why they wanted someone like that, but if I wasn't willing to take on that role, perhaps I could figure out another way to work with them. It sounded too good to be true to have my bread buttered on both sides that way, but I was going to go to bat for that kind of arrangement anyway.

"This is it," Rainey murmured as we slowed in front of the corner office. "Are you ready?"

"I am." I knew what I wanted to say. All I had to do now was figure out how to say it, but I wouldn't be able to do that until I met the man.

Astor's assistant showed us in immediately, and I was mildly surprised how small Max was in real life. He wasn't

tall or broad, but rather more of a pint-sized, older man with a jovial smile but a glint of steel in his eyes.

“Jesse Slone,” he said magnanimously as we walked into his massive office. “It’s nice to finally meet you in person, and Rainey, darling, thank you for getting him this far.”

My girl nodded, seemingly at ease with her big boss. “It was my pleasure, Max. I’m just glad we’re here now.”

Walking out from behind a desk so big that it dwarfed him, he came over to shake both of our hands. He waved for us to sit down before asking what we wanted to drink and placing the order with his assistant. Once that was done, he crossed back to his chair and sat down, his attention now fully on me.

“Thank you for coming out to visit us, Mr. Slone. I believe you like our offer, but that you hate the prospect of moving here.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “I’ll level with you from the get-go. This city just isn’t for me.”

Max inclined his head like he agreed with me. “It has a tendency to grow on people, but I hear you. It can be daunting and quite chaotic at times. Just this morning, I witnessed a near brawl between a street-food vendor and a sidewalk performer. I almost got knocked over while they argued over who was encroaching on the other’s space, but what I will tell you is this—there’s never a dull moment around here. It becomes rather addictive.”

My family has issues with addiction. I didn’t say it out loud, but that didn’t make it any less true. “Dull moments can be good for the soul, though.”

Especially in my case. I had one of those personalities that could get in trouble in a place like this. It wouldn’t be the drink or the drugs that would get me, but rather the pace. I’d get so caught up in it that I was liable to work myself to death without even realizing it was happening.

Max grinned at me. “That’s a very astute observation for such a young man. As it happens, I do value a dull moment

myself every once in a while, but I was under the impression that your generation was all about *living to the max.*”

“Nah,” I said. “That’s the generation after us.”

He chuckled. “It does seem to be getting worse with time. These days, it seems most kids can’t even enjoy a cup of coffee in peace and quiet without having to make a spectacle of it on social media.”

“That’s very true,” I agreed. “My worry is that I’m not like that. The less people know about me, the better. Give me peace and quiet over noise, chaos, and spectacle every day.”

“I appreciate your honesty,” he said after holding my gaze for a moment. “Perhaps we should pivot on the offer we made you. Take the rest of the time you’ve got here to see if the city will change your mind once it starts growing on you, and in the meantime, let me think about whether we could tailor our exciting offer. You’re an older soul, I see that now.”

“Thank you.” I was genuinely surprised that I hadn’t even had to take the swing for him to have picked up on what I would be more interested in.

Rainey didn’t interrupt us when he asked me more about my work and my existing client base. We discussed my process and the way I was working at the moment, and we also touched on where I saw myself going in the future.

All things considered, it was a pretty good meeting. Feeling better about it as we shook his hand and left, I grinned at Rainey. “Let me take you to dinner?”

She smiled at me, but there was something sad about it even as she nodded. “Sure, I would love that. Back to your safe space?”

“Nah, if I get you too close to a bed, the only thing I’m going to be eating is you. Let’s go out. Just nowhere too loud.”

“I think I know just the place,” she said, her hand brushing mine like she was itching to take it as we walked back to the elevators. “You know, Jesse, it would be really great to have you here. Max clearly likes you a lot, too. He doesn’t treat just

anybody that kindly or that comfortably. We could do big things together.”

Yeah, we could, but I knew how she meant it and I also knew that I didn't mean it the same way. Rainey and I were not on the same page about this. Hell, we weren't even in the same book. She was trying to sell me on working here, with her, and I'd skipped ahead to the *us* of it all.

I couldn't afford to think about that, though. There was no real *us* and there never would be. Her life was full and mine was fine just the way it was. It'd been fun to revisit the past with her and I'd gotten the closure I'd come here for.

It was time to get back to reality and to let her know that I was going there.

Jesse wasn't going to move here. I didn't know how I knew, but I did. He hadn't come right out and said it to Max in so many words, but the general tone of the meeting had made it clear enough. At least, to my mind, it had.

Jesse and I were quiet as we left the building and I took him to a little restaurant I'd found years ago. It was situated on a large terrace high up on the side of one of the buildings downtown. It had none of the typical New York glitz and glamour regardless of its location, and yet it'd been here for ages because it served the best homestyle food one could ask for.

There was also always a table available here because of the fact that it had none of the typical glitz and glamour. It'd never turned into a hotspot for social media moments and it was a humble restaurant with a chef who had been cooking the same amazing dishes for his whole career.

"This is more like it," Jesse said as we sat down, turning to face the view of the city before glancing back at me. "Where have you been hiding this place?"

"It's been right here, with all the many places like it scattered around the area. Contrary to what you seem to think, there really are a lot of pockets of peace available in New York, Jesse. You could be happy here."

For a long moment, he looked into my eyes, those greens searching mine until he finally nodded. "So you know?"

“Of course, I know,” I said gently, offering him a soft smile. I didn’t want him to see how disappointed I was or how much I wished he’d changed his mind. “You’re not staying here, are you?”

“No, I’m not,” he admitted, reaching across the table to place his hands on mine. “It’s nothing you did. You gave a great pitch and I’d have loved nothing more than to take you up on it, but I can’t stay. There’s no way. It would take nothing short of a miracle for me to stay here. I’m sorry, Rainey.”

The corners of my mouth turned down. “Hearing you say that makes me so damn sad, but at the same time, I’m going to fight for you to change your mind. We’ve still got a couple of days left. You never know. A few more places like this restaurant and you may start realizing that it’s not so bad.”

“You think Max is right and the city will grow on me?”

I nodded, turning my hands under his until our palms connected and my fingers twined around his. “I know it can grow on you. When we first arrived here, I really wasn’t happy and I didn’t think I ever would be. In fact, I had all these fanciful plans about getting out just as soon as I could.”

“Where did you want to go?”

I gave him another sad smile. “Back to you, of course. Wherever you were at that point, I was planning on joining you there. Obviously, it never happened, but I spent a lot of time planning my escape from here.”

“Why didn’t it happen?”

Since I couldn’t answer that question truthfully in its entirety, I skipped to the end of the explanation. “I woke up one morning and I realized that this was my home now. I also realized that despite my doubts and my absolute refusal to like anything about it, I’d fallen completely in love with it.”

“How?” he asked after pausing for a beat. “I just really don’t get it. I’m not trying to be stubborn or obstinate about this, but I cannot for the life of me imagine anyone actually wanting to live here. The way I’m thinking about it is that people come here for all the opportunities it offers. In that

case, I do understand why they come. What I can't understand is why they stay once they've made the best of those opportunities."

"They stay because once this place creeps into your heart, it digs its nails in and you realize that there's no other place like it. I get that it's too loud and busy for you, but you will also get used to it. Plus, like I said, there are so many places where it's not so loud and busy."

Jesse's gaze moved from one of my eyes to the other, his hands tightening their grip on me as he let out a slow breath. "It's not that I'm not listening to you or hearing what you're saying. It's just that everything I've seen so far makes it difficult for me to believe it can be true."

"Are you really that happy in Portland?" I asked. "It's a nice place and all, but there's nothing so special about it."

"No, there isn't, but I am happy there. I could probably be happy in a lot of other places. I'm just not sure New York is one of them."

"It could be," I insisted, feeling like someone had shaken a champagne bottle of emotion deep inside me and was now about to pop the cork. "I know you could be happy here and I'm going to prove it to you."

"You're really going to fight for me to stay?"

I nodded fiercely. "Yes, I am, and I'm going to win the fight, too. You said that you understood it when people came here to chase opportunity, right? Well, this is a huge opportunity for you. Gravity is an amazing place to work and Max is a very talented man himself. He'll definitely make it worth your while."

"I don't doubt him or you, but this is a decision I need to make for myself. If I make the wrong one, I could wind up as blocked as so many of your artists, and then where would we be? It could end my career if I hit that kind of roadblock."

"Do you really think that would happen?" I asked, a little ashamed that I hadn't even thought of it that way before. "You're always writing. Even when we've just been in the car

going from place to place, you're writing. It's like you can't stem the tide."

"Welcome to the inside of my head," he said lightly, trying to ease the tension before his expression grew serious again. "That is how it is for me now, but I'm not naïve enough to believe that it's always going to stay that way regardless of where I am or what I do. There have been times when the words have dried up. Thankfully, those times have never lasted long, but the point is that it can happen to me the same as it can happen to anyone else."

"Do you really think it will?"

He held my gaze as he lifted one shoulder in a slow shrug. "I honestly don't know, but what I do know is not to mess too much with something that's working. It's not just that, either. I've told you before that I stopped drinking when I realized it was becoming a problem, and I need to be cognizant of that side of me. The part of me that finds it hard to stop at times."

"I, uh, I didn't even think about that."

He gave me a small smile. "You didn't have any reason to, and hey, I'm not saying that if I move here, I'm automatically going to fall off the wagon and get blocked up. Those are just some of the factors I have to consider. It's a huge risk I'd be taking and I'd be doing it for the wrong reasons."

The look in his eyes right now made me think that I was those wrong reasons. I didn't want to be the wrong reasons. I wanted to be just one right reason, but I knew I wasn't that to him. Not in this moment that we were sitting here staring at each other like we both hated that we were here again, but also both accepting that we were.

"Is that your final answer?" I asked eventually, my voice barely above a whisper. "You're going home?"

"I'm not going anywhere tonight." When he didn't add to that statement, my heart dropped to my stomach.

I only had a few days left to convince him, and it looked like I had my work cut out for me. When I got home tonight, I

was going to have to come up with a whole new plan for the next few days if I was going to win him over.

Having said all it seemed he was willing to say on the topic, he started telling me more about Callum, his best friend. I told him all about Ellie in return, and before I knew it the restaurant was emptying out and our plates were empty.

Jesse noticed the same thing at the same time. “It looks like they’re getting ready to close up. We should probably leave, anyway. It’s getting late.”

I glanced at my watch, surprised by how fast time had passed. “Why does it always feel like we’ve run out of time while I’m still having fun with you?”

He laughed, but there wasn’t much humor in the sound. “It’s because our time is always running out faster than we’d like it to, but that’s life.”

As if he meant to reiterate our point probably without even knowing what we’d been talking about, the waiter brought our check. Jesse grabbed it before I could. “This one is on me. Gravity has treated me plenty since I got here. Let me pay this time.”

I pretended to pout. “They gave me a fancy card to charge our expenses to. I happen to enjoy using their money on you. Are you sure I can’t get it?”

“I’m sure.”

It felt like the gesture meant something. I just didn’t know what. Part of me suspected that he didn’t want the company to pay because he’d already made up his mind that he wouldn’t be signing with us, but the larger part of me didn’t want to believe that was true.

I wholeheartedly wanted to believe that he was still keeping an open mind, but something had changed after our meeting with Max. Maybe it was just that it was finally dawning on me that packing up one’s life to move across the country wasn’t as simple as I wanted it to be.

Not even when the place one would be moving to was a city others would kill for a similar chance in. Jesse had never

been like everyone else. He didn't conform simply for the sake of conforming. He certainly wasn't the type to approach a decision like this with stars in his eyes, blind to the potential realities.

If anything, he would do the complete opposite. He would approach it with extreme caution and analyze it to the point of over-analysis. It was no less than what I would do, but no one was asking me to move anywhere.

After he paid, we left the restaurant hand in hand, and for some reason, it felt like the beginning of the end of our time together. When we got back to the hotel, he didn't invite me up. Standing in the lobby, I smiled at him again but I could feel how sad it was.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow?"

He nodded. "I'll see you then."

Neither of us said anything more, and Jesse used his hand in mine to tug me closer to him. When my chest touched his, he brought his free hand up to stroke my cheek. Then he bent his head to give me the sweetest kiss I'd ever had.

As I left the hotel after, there were tears blurring my vision and an ache in my heart I couldn't get rid of. I would be here in the morning to pick him up as promised. I just didn't know if he would be here when I arrived.

My time in New York was ending. That meeting with Max and the conversation I'd had with Rainey after had made me realize that I'd already made my decision. I kept saying that it would take a miracle for me to move here, but those didn't happen every day.

The chances of anything changing my mind at this point were slim to none. I didn't like New York. I didn't want to live here and I didn't want to waste any more of anyone's time. As shitty as it was to have to leave Rainey behind, I had to and it was better to do it now than to spend the next couple of days pretending like it wasn't about to happen.

As I packed my bags before dawn, I wondered if I was doing the right thing by leaving before she came to pick me up. It felt like I was running away, sneaking off without a word. In many ways, that was exactly what I was doing. In another way, which was the most important part, I just didn't know if I had the strength to say goodbye to Rainey again.

Besides, I had a feeling that she knew as well as I did that last night had been goodbye. There had been something final about the meal, the night, and the kiss. Although I'd only consciously made the decision to leave this morning long after I'd gotten back to my suite, my subconscious had known what was happening some time before my conscious brain had.

The fact of the matter was that Rainey and I weren't together. Regardless of how much it felt like we should be, we weren't. She had Jenna, and Gravity, and New York, and I had

my clients and Portland. Our lives had taken us in different directions on opposite sides of the country.

It would've been great if things had been different, but they weren't. It was time to stop pretending like they were. Once the last of my stuff was in, I zipped up my suitcase and checked the time. I'd managed to get a flight out in a couple of hours, and if I wanted to be on it, which I did, I had to go.

After lifting my bag off the bed and setting it down on the floor, I did one last check to make sure I wasn't leaving anything behind. I hadn't brought anything irreplaceable, but it would've been really annoying if I got back to my place and didn't have any toothpaste.

Memories of brushing my teeth next to Rainey slammed into me with such force that I made a strangled noise at the back of my throat. *Fuck.*

All I'd done was think the word toothpaste, and here I was, doubting my decision all over again. Getting into the swing of my life without her was going to suck, but that didn't change anything. *I did it once. I can do it again.*

The only person who knew my plans had changed was Callum. I'd texted him to tell him I'd be back today after I'd booked my flight.

As I climbed into the rideshare I'd ordered, I sat back and shut my eyes, silently saying goodbye to the city and the woman I'd come here to see. Before I boarded the plane, I saw a missed call from her on my phone, but I didn't return it.

Maybe I would after I landed, but maybe I wouldn't. I just didn't know.

When I finally got back to Oregon, it felt like I could breathe again. Portland had been good to me and it was home. To me, there was nothing like it. I even smiled, which I didn't do too often when Rainey wasn't around.

As I walked into my place, Callum was there, sitting in my TV room watching a reality show that was going to fuck up my recommendations for a long, long time. He grinned when I

walked in, sliding his feet off the coffee table and getting up to shake my hand.

“Surprise,” he said dryly. “I thought you might need some moral support when you got home, so here I am.”

“Here you are,” I repeated, glancing at the TV after withdrawing my hand from his. “Did it occur to you before you put that on that my streaming provider is now going to think I want to watch shows like this?”

“It did.” His grin widened. “I loved it on your behalf. Gave it a double heart to make sure they recommend more like it.”

I groaned. “Welcome home to me.”

He laughed. “Welcome home, buddy. How was the trip?”

“It was okay.” I shrugged and strode to the kitchen to grab a coffee pod out of the jar next to the machine. As I popped it into place, I reached up to get a mug, then put it into position before I turned to lean against the counter and crossed my arms. “Gravity seems like a great place to work, but I turned down their offer.”

He followed me to the kitchen and stood across the island from me with his hands in his pockets as he gave me a curious look. “Are they going to make another one?”

“I don’t know. They might. The CEO didn’t seem entirely opposed to rethinking the kind of role they wanted me to take.”

He nodded slowly, flashing me a resigned smile. “You’re not moving there, then?”

“Nope. I really don’t like that city. It’s not awful and I’m sure I could’ve made it work if I wanted to, but it’s just not for me.”

“I hear you. It’s a big opportunity to walk away from, though. Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

A beep told me my coffee was done, and I jerked my head toward it. “You want one?”

“No, I’m okay. Thanks.” He waited while I picked up my mug and then walked with me when I headed to the balcony. “You haven’t answered my question. Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“No.” I sighed as I sat down, carefully balancing my coffee in one hand and scrubbing the palm of the other over the sharp stubble on my jaw. “I really didn’t like the city, but as you correctly pointed out, it’s a big opportunity to walk away from. There’s a part of me that wonders if I’m being too dramatic. I’m not irreplaceable to anyone and I’m not exactly a superstar. They can find another me, but there is only one Gravity.”

“Sure, but there are other agencies,” he said. “If you want to go that route, I’m pretty sure at least one of them would snap you up.”

“Probably, but they sure as shit won’t pay what Gravity offered. They also wouldn’t give me the same perks.”

He stood against the railing with his back to the view, staring off absently into my apartment instead. “You could give it a try. Maybe they won’t offer you exactly what Gravity did, but that doesn’t mean they won’t pay well or give good perks.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I raised the mug to my lips, taking a small sip of the piping hot liquid as I looked out over the city I called home. “It’s beautiful here. I like that I can see the snow on the mountains and that I can hear myself think, but is it worth turning down what I just turned down?”

Glancing over his shoulder to follow my gaze, he shook his head. “Only you can answer that question. Like you said, though, you’ve already turned it down. What about your girl? How’d she take the news that you were leaving?”

“She didn’t.” I was looking at the city and not at him, but I felt his eyes burning holes into me when he snapped his gaze to mine.

“What do you mean *she didn’t*?” In my periphery, I saw his jaw tightening. “Jesse? Did you not tell her that you were

coming home early?”

“Ding, ding, ding.” I rolled my eyes when he gaped at me. “Don’t look at me like that. I had an early flight and she only dropped me off late last night. There wasn’t really any time to let her know I was leaving.”

“Bullshit.” If there was one thing Callum could always be counted on to do, it was giving it to me straight. “You could’ve at least texted her. Even if it was the middle of the night.”

“For what purpose? I didn’t tell her, but she knew I was leaving. We both knew it when we said our goodbyes last night.”

“For what purpose? How about, uh, I don’t know, common decency?” He came over and dropped into the armchair across from the sofa I was on. “Why do I feel like there’s something you’re not telling me?”

“There’s a lot I’m not telling you, but none of it matters. The important part is that you were right. She has a life in New York and I’m not part of it.”

“Did you guys have a fight or something?”

I shook my head. “Leave it be, man. It was good to see her again, but we’re not in high school anymore. We’re not dating and living in a dream world where we think that love can overcome all odds.”

“Now you see why I fucked with your recommendations,” he muttered. “You really need to watch one of those shows. People find love in the most unlikely places, dude. They find it and they make it work.”

“Have you ever done an internet search on any of those couples? They don’t stay together. It’s all for show, so no. I really don’t need to watch them.”

He let out a disappointed huff. “You’re impossible, but more to the point, you’re also wrong. Love *can* overcome all odds. If you let it, but you haven’t done that.”

“No, I haven’t because I don’t love her. I mean, I like her a lot and maybe there’s a tiny piece of the person I used to be

deep down inside that will always love her, but not like that. It's not the kind of love that you're trying to make it sound like."

I was straight up lying. At least, I thought I was. Since I'd never loved anyone romantically, I couldn't be one hundred percent sure, but I'd never felt like this. It was entirely possible that I did love her and that it was, in fact, the kind of love he was trying to make it sound like, but who knew? I sure as hell didn't.

Back when we'd been kids, I'd been convinced that I loved her. Maybe I even had. It was different now, though. When I was with her, I felt things that no one else made me feel. It was just so easy to be around her that I acted nothing like myself when I was.

But at the same time, we were adults now. We couldn't just go tossing the L-word around and believing that it made the world go round. We had lives. Responsibilities. Clients and other people who were counting on us.

Callum drew me out of my thoughts when he gave me a look of sharp disapproval. "Regardless, you should've let her know you were leaving. You're different when it comes to her, man. Maybe it's just because she was your high school sweetheart, but if there was anything between you two while you were over there, you should call her."

"Why? She didn't give me that courtesy when she left. It's done now. Leave it alone."

"She was a child when she left. Besides, you're better than that, Jesse."

I didn't know if that was true. After all, I'd just left without a word, and while he was probably right that I should call her, I wasn't going to. A clean cut had helped me get over it back then. Maybe history would repeat itself and it would make it easier on both of us this way again.

I bolted upright in bed long before my alarm went off. A quick glance at the digital clock on my nightstand told me I still had hours before I had to pick Jesse up for breakfast, and yet I was wide awake.

As my stomach rolled and I felt the sudden urge to be sick, I realized what had woken me up. *Oh, shit. I'm about to vomit.*

Rolling out of bed, I stumbled over my own feet as I raced to the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet on time. I dropped to my knees in front of it, feeling like I was about to die. At the very least, I was death adjacent. I had to be.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I didn't know, but I also wasn't going to make it to breakfast if this was what I was in for today. It was the worst possible time for me to get sick but obviously something I'd eaten hadn't agreed with me or I'd caught a stomach bug.

Crap. I only had a couple of days left to convince Jesse to give New York a real chance and yet, as I kept heaving, worshipping at the porcelain throne in the worst possible way, I already knew there was no way I was going to be in any state to convince anyone to do anything today.

I groaned, hoping against all hope that this wasn't because of the food we'd had last night. That restaurant had been one of the few things he'd actually liked about the city so far. If he got sick because of our meal, he'd take it as a sign that there really was nothing good about this place. That even the things that seemed nice came back to bite you in the ass.

It was only then that I remembered I didn't even know if he was still here. My heart skipped, but even that made me feel all the more nauseated. Dragging my hair back with my fingers, I kept it held up as I lost everything I'd had in me—even the darn will to live.

Eventually, what felt like hours later but had only been about fifteen minutes in reality, the nausea disappeared as abruptly as it'd come. Maybe it was just because there was nothing left in my stomach, but I suddenly felt a lot better.

After brushing my teeth, taking a shower, and then brushing my teeth again, I headed back to my bedroom and got dressed for the day. While I'd have liked to go back to sleep, I was already awake. I might as well get some work done while I was.

With my mind wandering back to Jesse, I snapped my bra into place and frowned when I realized that it felt like it wasn't sitting right. Glancing down at my chest to make sure I hadn't grabbed a bra that was too small for me, two things suddenly occurred to me.

One was that my breasts felt different. It wasn't the bra. It was me. The bra was new, and last month when I'd bought it, it had fit me like a glove. The other thing I realized was that my nipples were a little sore. The lace encasing them was soft, but somehow, it was scratching the very tips of my nipples anyway.

All the blood in my body rushed to my feet when I realized I'd felt like this before. Only once. When I'd been seventeen.

Holy fuck, I can't be pregnant again. There's no way I'm pregnant again. Am I?

As my mind raced over all the times Jesse and I had slept together, I felt marginally better when I realized that we'd always used a condom. But when I flinched as soon as I fastened the buttons of my shirt over my breasts, I knew.

My boobs weren't super sensitive. I wasn't one of those women who needed to play with them to get myself there, and

while I enjoyed it when Jesse touched them, it was only ever really when I was with him that I was even aware of them.

Right now, however, I was hyper aware of them. With every move I made while putting on my pants, brushing my hair, and doing my makeup, I was careful not to get my arms too close to them. Whenever I so much as brushed against them, it hurt. And my nipples were still sore. And just a little while ago, I'd been so nauseated that I'd been sure I was at death's door and now I was fine again.

Food poisoning and stomach bugs didn't make your boobs hurt. Shit.

Since there had been so many other things going on when I'd been in the early pregnancy stages with Jenna, I hadn't thought that I even remembered the symptoms in much detail. But it was all coming back to me now, and fast.

The nausea. The boobs. The nipples. I'd felt it all before, in this exact same sequence as I was feeling it now.

As the realization sank in, blackness closed in at the edge of my vision. Sinking down to my haunches, I squeezed my eyes shut and breathed. *No. No. No. This can't be happening. Not again.*

But it was.

It was happening. Tears leaked out from my tightly shut lids, sliding down my cheeks as my lungs constricted and I forgot how to breathe.

Thank God, I woke up so early. The only consolation in any of this was that I could fall apart without Jenna or my mother walking in on me.

And fall apart, I did. For the longest time, I sat right there on my bedroom floor and cried. *How am I back here? How am I going through this all over again? What have I done?*

Those questions and so many others sped through my mind, but none of them had any answers. *I'm screwed. I'm so screwed. When my mom finds out about this...*

I didn't even want to think about her reaction. That thought made me realize that I didn't have to think about her reaction, not in the same way I'd had to last time at least.

For starters, she wasn't here with me this time. She didn't have to know immediately. It would be months before I showed, and even then, I could buy myself more time with baggy clothes.

Another massive difference was that I wasn't a teenager anymore. *I'm a grown woman with a job and money in savings. I'm already a mother and I have the most wonderful daughter despite her mood swings.*

I'd also already been through this once. I knew what to expect from the pregnancy and every other phase until the child turned twelve. I had the means to support myself, Jenna, and a baby, and while my mother wouldn't be happy about it, she didn't have to be.

Moving out had been in the cards for us anyway. It was something I should've done a long time ago and something I needed to do now for Jenna's sake, if not my own. *So what if I can't afford to buy the picture perfect house in the suburbs?*

We didn't need that. We just needed a place to call our own, and with all the money I'd been saving as well as my salary, I could definitely afford for us to have that. As if the tiny peanut I already knew was in my womb was lending me strength it couldn't possibly have, I suddenly realized that I'd spent my entire adult life so far under my mother's thumb.

I'd felt like I owed it to her—to them—to keep being their obedient daughter who toed the line in an effort to make up for disappointing them when I became a teenage mother. I'd felt like they deserved it because of everything they'd done for us.

But I had a right to live my own life. I just hadn't really been doing it. Fear and threats had been holding me back, but for the first time, I felt like I had more clarity than I'd ever had before. My mother could make all the threats she wanted, but they couldn't really afford protracted litigation either.

Over and above that, my father wouldn't allow her to use all their money to sue me for custody of a child that wasn't theirs. Or maybe he would. I didn't really know, but what I did know was that I was Jenna's mother and that I was a good one at that.

No court would take her away from me. I'd been doing a bit of reading on custody matters and it wasn't as simple for them to take her from me as my mother had been having me believe all these years. She'd been acting like all she had to do was ask, and the child would simply be handed over to her. At times, she'd even made me feel like she was doing me a favor for not suing me for custody.

The revelations kept coming, and the next ones were about Jesse. He had the right to know about Jenna and my mother wouldn't stop me from telling him anymore. My mother also couldn't stop me from contacting him or even being in a relationship with him if I wanted to be.

We were adults. We both earned good money—his much better than mine, of course. We had careers and he even owned property. Soon, I could own property too.

I didn't know why it'd taken me so long, but it was like the wool had been yanked away from my eyes, and with it, I suddenly found the strength to get up. When I did, I marched right over to my phone and plucked it up from my nightstand, navigating to Jesse's number and decisively pressing the call button.

I was going to come clean to him about everything. Right here and right now. It was probably a conversation we should've had in person, but I was done waiting. Now that I'd made up my mind, I needed to tell him right away.

The urgency swirling around in my gut turned to frustration when he didn't answer. When I tried again, his phone was off.

Where are you, Jesse? Why aren't you talking to me?

Every time I tried after that, his phone was off. *Okay, then. Maybe I won't tell you right now, but I will be telling you soon.*

As soon as you answer your phone or I see you in person at the hotel. Whichever comes first.

When I heard movement out in the hallway and checked the clock again, I realized that my time alone had come to an end. Jenna was up and getting ready for school, and I had to pack her lunch and drop her off before I could do anything else.

It took everything I had in me to put up a front like everything was normal while we went through our morning routine, but I managed. I wouldn't say anything to her before I knew for sure or before I'd spoken to Jesse.

I tried him again on my way to the office, but his phone still hadn't been turned back on. Huffing out a frustrated breath, I marched straight to Ellie's cubicle when I arrived. I needed to talk to someone, and since my potential baby daddy was still sleeping or something, my best friend was about to get an earful.

"Can I buy you breakfast?" I asked when she glanced up at me from where she was sitting behind her computer screen.

Her brows lifted, but then she smiled and rolled her chair away from her desk immediately. "Definitely, but why are you so pale?"

"Because we need to make a detour to the drug store before we pick up our breakfast, and then we're going to have to go to your place to eat. And for me to use your bathroom. Is that okay?"

Her eyes widened, the pieces of the puzzle snapping into place immediately. Hanging onto my arm as she dragged me to the elevators, she bent her head close to mine and kept her voice at a stage whisper. "Are you serious? You think you're pregnant?"

I nodded but didn't say anything else about it as we climbed into the first available car and descended to the lobby. Ellie seemed to realize that I didn't want to talk about it while we were still in the building, but as we stepped out onto the street, she turned to me.

“Okay, it’s time for you to tell me what’s going on. Do you really think you’re pregnant? Is it Jesse’s?”

“If I am pregnant, then yes. It’s Jesse’s.” After that, I explained everything to her, and unlike me, she went straight into excitement after the initial shock wore off.

“Why aren’t you happy about this?” she squealed softly while I selected one of every brand of pregnancy test stocked in the store. “You guys made another baby together. You’re in love with him and I’m pretty sure he’s in love with you too. I mean, obviously, I’ve never met the guy, but there’s no way he doesn’t love you. Everyone loves you.”

“Jesse might not love me, but he’s really not going to be happy with me when I tell him about all of this.” Panic threatened to invade my bloodstream but I held it back, focusing on doing what I needed to do for now.

The practicalities of buying the tests, getting breakfast, and then taking a cab to Ellie’s apartment kept me focused enough that I didn’t break down again. But as I sat down on the toilet to take the first test, I closed my eyes and prayed that no matter what the result, Jesse would be there for me this time. Just like he should’ve been over a decade ago.

My mother had prevented it then, but I wouldn’t let her—or New York or Portland—stand in our way this time. I loved him and I was going to fight for him, whether we were having another baby together or not.

A month after I'd come home, I was properly back in the swing of things. I sat behind the piano with a client I'd worked with before. One of the songs I'd written in New York was open in front of us, and while it kind of hurt to look at the words, the client seemed to like them.

"This is exactly what I've been looking for," he raved. "Again. Thank you, Jesse. Seriously. I don't know what I would've done without you."

"You'll never have to know," I said. "Are you sure you don't want to look at more before you decide?"

He shook his head, brilliant, famous eyes bright with excitement. "No, I'm all good. This one is perfect. It also goes well with the others I got from you last week, so it'll round off the album nicely. These are all going to be big hits, man. You sure you want to sell them?"

"Yes." All of the ones he'd bought recently were songs I'd written on my trip. I didn't need them lying around in my apartment and I still wasn't interested in performing them myself. "Should we get started?"

"Sure." He cracked his knuckles, wiggling his fingers after for good measure. "I'm ready. Let's do this."

As we were about to get underway, he grinned and arched a brow at me. "The songs you've been writing this last month have been a lot more upbeat than your stuff used to be. Why is that? Have you fallen in love or something?"

I shrugged. “I’m just writing what I know. I go where the muse takes me, but I thought you were ready to go. Why are we still talking?”

He laughed, rolling his eyes at me. “Still as prickly as ever, though. Maybe you didn’t fall in love. I really am interested in learning more about these songs, though. I’ve always loved your work, but this shit is next level.”

“Thank you.” I motioned at the piano. “If you love it so much, should we play it?”

“Yeah, we probably should, especially if you’re really not going to give me any details about what brought out this lighter side of you.”

“A shift in perspective,” I said curtly. “I also had a change of scenery for a little while, so that might have something to do with it, too.”

Although all the songs he’d bought had been ones I’d written in New York, he was also right about the general tone of my work after I’d returned. Before Rainey had come back into my life, most of my songs had been pretty heavy. A lot darker than they were now.

I’d had a few that’d been more upbeat, but not many. If people wanted my stuff to be happy, they had to make it that way themselves.

Since I’d come back, though, that had changed. I wasn’t necessarily happy, and therefore my songs weren’t either, but Rainey had helped me remember what life could be like. She’d helped me laugh and lighten up, and she’d also reminded me what it was like to have fun.

While it sucked to have only gotten all that back for a short time, the things I’d learned while I’d been with her had stuck with me. As a result, my music had changed.

I didn’t know how long it was going to last, but for now, I—and my clients—were pretty satisfied with what was coming out. They were also referring me now more than ever, and I suddenly had so many more new client requests that I didn’t know what to do with them.

In the end, I hadn't signed up with Gravity, but clients were still coming to me. Meanwhile, I'd also decided to look into hiring an assistant to help me with the human end of things. If someone could just do all that so I wouldn't have to, my life would be as close to perfect as it was ever going to get.

Relieved when the client finally started playing the song instead of asking more questions, I listened closely, stopping him every so often to help him through the song and to show him how it should sound. With every suggestion I made, he got more excited.

"Thanks to you, Hayden Hewitt is back!" He clapped his hands, dancing on the piano chair as his body snaked from side to side.

Although I didn't make a habit of getting too friendly with my clients, I laughed. "I wasn't aware you'd gone anywhere, Hayden Hewitt."

He waggled his brows at me. "It's hard to stay relevant if you've been doing this for as long as I have."

"You're twenty-five," I pointed out. "It's not like you're a dinosaur."

"Sure, but I started when I was sixteen. A lot of people still think of me as that same kid and a lot of my fans grew out of their obsession with me."

"That sounds tough," I said, surprising myself with the response. In the past, I'd just have thought it. I definitely wouldn't have said it out loud.

Hayden looked as surprised as I was. "It has been tough, but are you sure you're not in love? Maybe you're not so prickly anymore after all. You've been talking to me more in these sessions we've been having this last month than you ever have before—in all the other sessions we've had combined. And I've been buying songs from you for years."

I chuckled. "Like I said, I'm just writing what I know. Since you seem to need to talk instead of work, though, let's talk. What do you have in mind for this album?"

“So your suggestion for letting me talk instead of work is to talk about work? That tracks, actually.” His head shook, but at least he was smiling. “I need this album to show who I’ve become as an artist. In the last nine years, I’ve had sex and I’ve done drugs. I’ve had my heart broken and I’ve made decisions I regret, but that’s part of life, man. I’ve lived, just like everyone else, and I’ve gotten through more shit than the tabloids can ever find out about.”

“You want people to know you’ve done drugs?”

He laughed. “You know what I mean. I just want people to realize that I’ve lived. That I *am* living. I want guys to realize that I’m not just that teenage heartthrob their high school girlfriends had posters of in their bedrooms. I also want women to realize that just because they don’t have my poster in their bedrooms anymore, it doesn’t mean that they don’t like my music.”

“Okay, I get that, but I don’t really understand where it’s coming from. You’re still a superstar. You still sell out stadiums and get awards for every album you put out.”

“Yeah, but I can’t help feeling like I need to change things up a bit. I’ve been feeling that way for a while. In the wise words of Miley Cyrus, it’s about the climb, bro.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, that’s a pretty good point. How many songs do you still need for your album?”

“This will be the last one,” he said.

My eyes narrowed as I thought it over. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you bought *Life’s A Peach*, right?”

“I did.” He smirked. “Fucking love that song. I’m so glad I won that bidding war.”

“It was hardly a bidding war, but sure. I’m glad you won, too. The only thing is that you’re not going to put it on this album.”

His gaze turned hard. “You can’t have it back. I’ve already pai—”

“I don’t want it back.” I got up and walked over to my laptop bag, pulling out my notebook and carrying it back to the piano. “You’re not going to put it on this album because it’s a fun song, but it doesn’t say any of those things you want to convey. It’s too much like your old stuff. In fact, I wrote it while thinking about a pre-teen.”

His eyes bulged. “You did?”

My nose wrinkled as I snorted. “I wasn’t thinking about her like that, asshole. When I was in New York, I met this twelve-year-old who got in trouble for doing the right thing. Life’s a bitch that way, but people are always telling us to look on the bright side.”

“Ah, okay. I think I’m getting it. That’s why it’s *Life’s a Peach* and not *Life’s a Bitch*.”

“Exactly. The point I’m trying to make, however, is that the song is too poppy and too fun for the message you’re trying to send. Release it as a single or keep it for your next album. Whatever works for you, but I’ve got something else for you to take its place on this album.”

“Hang on a second, you’re actively helping me now?”

I shrugged, grinning at him when he shot me a disbelieving look. “That’s what you pay me for, isn’t it? The song I’ve got in mind for you is one I kind of forgot about until I heard you talking about what you wanted this album to say about you.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. “Let’s have it. What’s it about?”

“It’s about seeing your high school sweetheart now that she’s all grown up. It’s about how she’s not the girl with the posters on her wall anymore and wondering why life worked out the way it did. It’s about growth, and changing, and how things turned out so different to what you once thought it would.”

“Whoa, that sounds amazing. Not upbeat, but amazing.”

I laughed. “It’s surprisingly upbeat.”

“I can’t wait to hear it, then,” Hayden said, curiously peering over at my notebook. “So that’s the treasure trove,

huh? The place you hide the gold?”

“One of them,” I admitted. “I’d have prettied it up for you if I’d known all this before the session, but you’re going to have to live with it in my crappy handwriting for now.”

“I’ll survive,” he assured me, then settled in to listen as I played him the song.

When I was done, he jumped to his feet and gave me a standing ovation. Then he threw his arms around my shoulders and hugged me. “That one is *awesome*, Jesse. Is it really available? No one else has heard it or put in a bid for it?”

“This page hasn’t seen the light of day since I turned it after I got done writing the song. It’s yours.”

He finally released me, ecstatic and actually eager to work for the rest of our session. It ran long since we now had two songs to perfect, but by the end, we were both sure that he was going to do great things with those songs.

As I left the studio, I thought about the song I’d just sold. I’d written it on the airplane on my way back to Portland and it meant a lot to me, but if anyone was going to do it justice, it was Hayden when he was as determined as he was right now.

Part of me missed being in New York with Rainey, especially after a session like that. Whenever it went down that way, I imagined what life would’ve been like if I’d taken the offer. I could’ve been going home to her to tell her all about it. Or I could’ve been alone in a city I didn’t like, trying to call her and not getting through because once she’d recruited me, she’d disappeared from my life despite us being in the same city.

It might’ve gone either way.

As much as that part of me missed being with her, though, I knew I’d made the right decision. Still, she made me happy even when I wasn’t with her. That was why my songs had been more upbeat. It was because of what she’d shown me, but it was also just because I’d had her back in my life.

Just knowing that she was out there, doing well, and still loving life made me happy enough. I didn’t need to be with

her for that.

Longing grew like a living thing inside me as I headed back to my apartment. I didn't need to be with her for her to make me happy, but I really did fucking miss her and miss fucking her, so it didn't really matter which order those two words were in.

I hadn't heard a peep from her since I'd left, though. For all I knew, she'd forgotten about me all over again.

As I walked down the hall to my front door, I thought my longing for her was making me see things. After blinking and then pinching myself, I realized I wasn't hallucinating.

Rainey Hollenbeck really was waiting for me outside my apartment. *Why the hell did she come all the way across the country for me?*

Jesse smiled at me, definitely surprised but not angry about me showing up at his place unannounced. *Until I tell him what I came here to tell him, that is.*

“After you,” he said once he’d unlocked his door, waving me into his apartment ahead of him. “What’s going on, Rainey? What are you doing here?”

“I, uh, I had to see you.”

As he shut his door behind us, he caught my wrist and tugged me into him, then held me tight as he whispered against my ear. “That makes two of us. I’ve been needing to see you for a while now. I hope you haven’t been waiting for too long. Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, I’m okay,” I murmured, breathing him in and wishing I could stay right here in his arms forever.

When he finally released me after crushing me to his chest for another long minute, I followed him to the kitchen, so nervous that my heart was in my throat and my mouth was bone dry. My hands dropped to my belly, and even though I wasn’t anywhere near showing just yet, I still felt the need to cradle the tiny peanut deep inside me.

“There’s something we need to talk about and I thought it was best to talk about it in person,” I said.

“Okay,” he agreed slowly, turning to grin at me and linking his hand with mine to give my fingers a squeeze before he let go again. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like something to drink?”

I need some coffee. You never turn down a good coffee, right?”

He crossed to the counter with his machine on it and flipped over two cups from the cabinet above it. I shook my head. “No, thank you. I’m off caffeine for the moment.”

He glanced at me, frowning as he searched my eyes while sliding a pod into his coffee machine at the same time. “You’re kidding me, right? What’s that all about? Is it some new fad diet kind of thing?”

“Uh, no. It’s not a diet thing. It’s a pregnancy thing.” Just like that, the words that had been eluding me for over two thousand miles of traveling popped out of my mouth. I’d had so many ideas about how to ease him into this, but none of them had stuck.

Two thousand miles of not being able to find the right words, and I ended up just blurting out the beginning of the story that was going to make him hate me by the end of it. Right now, though, he didn’t hate me.

At first, he didn’t move a muscle. Not even to blink or breathe, but then a slow grin started spreading on his lips and he dropped the mug he’d been holding before he rushed over to me and wrapped me up in his strong arms.

The porcelain shattered on the floor, breaking into a bazillion pieces. Just like both of our hearts were probably about to.

“Rainey,” he breathed against my hair, making goosebumps rise on my skin as his breath feathered over it.

Everything felt so amplified right now, emotionally and physically, and a rush of need so heady that I felt dizzy for a moment raced through me. Thankfully, he was holding me so tight that when I sagged against him, he held me closer, literally keeping me upright.

Pulling his head back without letting me go, I saw the tender care in his eyes when they met mine. The gentle worry swirling around underneath the fierce need to protect. “What’s wrong? What just happened?”

“Nothing, I, uh, I got dizzy, is all.” I hadn’t come here to lie to him, but at the same time, I also hadn’t come here for sex. I couldn’t tell him that having him breathe on me had made me so horny that I hadn’t been able to stand on my own two legs. If I did, he’d have me naked in no time.

And that would only make what I’d come here to say that much more difficult.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat, feeling tears suddenly pricking at the backs of my eyes. Instead of lust, I was now filled with sorrow, the emotions switching places so fast that it nearly gave me whiplash.

As I looked up into those gorgeous greens, so vibrant and so *excited*, all the fear I’d been holding onto melted away. My mother was going to kill me. She was going to try to take our babies from me, but with Jesse by my side, Mom and Dad standing together like we always should’ve been, she wouldn’t have a chance.

I’d called a lawyer about it after my revelations the day I found out about the peanut. We’d been talking a little while I’d been setting everything up to be able to come here. Apparently, if Jesse and I got together for real and could prove that we could support our children, which we could, my parents would fail dismally in any battle for custody.

Even without Jesse, they didn’t have much chance of success, I’d learned, but I really didn’t want to have to go through it all alone all over again. He was about to hate me, but hopefully he would give me a chance to explain. And then hopefully, sooner rather than later, he would forgive me.

The next words came out of my mouth fast as I stood there, my fingers playing with the soft, short hair at the back of his head. “I don’t want to do this without you again, Jesse. I won’t let it happen all over again. It doesn’t matter what my parents say this time, I—”

His arms dropped like weights back to his sides, releasing me as he took a big step back and looked me right in the eyes. “What do you mean *again*, Rainey? What do you mean it doesn’t matter what your parents say *this time*? Please tell me

that I'm jumping to the wrong conclusions here. For the love of God, please don't tell me that you were lying to me back in New York and that Jenna is mine."

"Jenna is yours," I admitted as the tears that had been threatening to make their appearance suddenly came out with a vengeance. "I'm so sorry, Jesse. I should've told you. I should've been honest when you—"

"Damn fucking right you should have," he yelled, scrubbing his hands over the stubble on his jaw as he narrowed those beautiful eyes at me. They were so cold now that it hurt when he looked at me. It made me feel like my entire body had gotten frozen to metal. "How could you do this to me? How could you look me right in the eyes and tell me she wasn't fucking mine?"

Since I had a feeling the questions were rhetorical, I didn't answer. I wouldn't have been able to anyway, since I was crying so hard now that I was hiccupping while he ranted. "Jesus Christ, Rainey. What the fuck? I asked you, multiple times actually, if she was mine. You said no every time."

He thrust a hand toward my stomach. "How do I even know that what's inside there is mine, or that Jenna is? You seem to be deciding from day-to-day who her father is. One day, it's a guy you had a one-night stand with, and a few weeks later, it's me. Fuck knows how many other candidates have heard this same thing before."

"That's not true," I denied vehemently, a steady stream of tears flowing freely down my cheeks. "Not a word of that is true. Both of them are yours, and if you want to take a paternity test, we can do it."

"You sound pretty sure," he said biting. "Then again, you sounded sure when you told me Jenna wasn't mine, too."

"That's because I *am* sure," I cried. "You're the only man I've ever been with, Jesse. So unless there's some immaculate conception going on, they're yours."

That shut him up, but only for a moment. "Okay, so you're not a slut. Or so you say. The problem with you, Rainey, is that

you say a lot of things, and I trusted you. I fucking trusted you when you were lying straight to my face. You looked me in the eyes, and you fucking lied.”

“I haven’t heard you say the f-wo—”

He wasn’t done. “Don’t you dare lecture me about my fucking language right now. Trust me, fuck is a baby word in comparison to the words I want to be saying. The names I want to be calling you right now...”

His head shook. “Could you not have taken one fucking minute when I was in that car with my daughter to say, *hey guys. Guess what? Jenna, this is your father.* But no. What did you do instead, Rainey? What did you fucking do?”

“I got annoyed with you for interrupting while I was lecturing her,” I whispered.

Jesse nodded curtly, his fingers snapping time and time again. “Yeah, that’s it. So we remember that day the same way, then? Good. Because I remember you making me feel like shit for having an opinion about how you raised *your* daughter. I remember you admonishing me for checking on her wellbeing after she threw that punch.”

He let out a dry burst of laughter and bent over at the waist, putting his hands on his knees and breathing hard. “You know what else I remember, Rainey? Other than you lying to my face, that is? I remember you taking off your fucking clothes when we got back to the hotel that night and being all like, *I need you, Jesse. Please, Jesse.* And like the idiot I am, I didn’t sit you down and insist that we talk about your daughter. About *our* fucking daughter.”

Straightening up again, he wagged a finger from his chest to mine and back again. “No, what I did is I fucked you. I fucked you because I trusted that you’d told me the truth and I figured it was none of my business to interrogate you about her. Do you know why I thought that?”

“Because you trusted me?”

“Damn straight it was because I trusted you. I’ve never lied to you once in my entire fucking life, and this is how you

repay me?”

“That’s not true, Jesse. You told me you were thinking about moving to New York, and then you disappeared.”

“I was thinking about moving there to be with *you*.” He breathed out heavily, scoffing as he tried to hold back some more humorless laughter. “I was considering uprooting my entire life to be there with you. To move there to give us a chance to be together. Finally.”

“But then you didn’t move there, so it doesn’t even matter.” More tears streamed down my cheeks. “I’m so sorry, Jesse.”

“You’re sorry? Is that all you’ve got? How could you do this to me, Rainey? To Jenna. To us. I mean, fuck. She’s taken on that protective role because she’s never had a father to protect her.” He thumped hard on his chest. “*I’m* her father, Rainey. I’m her fucking father and I would’ve done that for her. I would’ve wanted to do that for her.”

Moisture started shimmering in his reddened eyes now, and he tugged his hair before spinning in a fast circle and striding over to the cabinet with the mugs in it. Lightning fast, his fingers rolled into a fist and he pulled back, letting it fly and splintering open the door in the process.

Instantly, streaks of blood appeared at the cuts on his arm and I gasped, but he spun around to face me again. “Like father, like daughter, it seems. Only this is *my* fucking cabinet and I don’t have to listen to you lecturing me about punching it. I also don’t have to listen to you pretending to care that I hurt myself. In fact, I don’t have to listen to you at all. Get out.”

“What?” My heart thundered in my chest. “No, Jesse. Please, I can explain.”

“You’ve had twelve years’ worth of chances to explain. I don’t want to hear it right now. Just get the fuck out.”

“What about—”

“That one?” His narrowed eyes dropped down to where my hands were back to cradling my stomach. “I want a

paternity test before you'll be getting a cent from me.”

“I don't want your money, Jesse.”

“Why are you here, then?” he shouted, his eyes redder and wetter than ever. “You've stolen my daughter's entire childhood from me, if she's even mine, and now you show up here and tell me that *you* can't do it again? Fucking thank you, Rainey. Thanks a lot.”

“Jenna is still a child, she—”

“She's almost a fucking teenager, Rainey. She's not a child anymore. I've missed that. All of it. Everything from getting to be there to see her take her first breath all the way through to eating dinner with her last night. The big things, the small things, and everything in between. You took that from me. Excuse me for needing a fucking minute to get my head wrapped around all that.”

When I didn't move, he stormed past me to his door, yanking it open and pointing at the hallway beyond. “Get. The fuck. Out. Now. Please.”

I took a deep, shuddering breath but forced my feet to move toward him. “I really am sorry, Jesse. I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I know you hate me right now, but when you're ready, call me. We're going to need to talk.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” he muttered thickly, clearly fighting back the tears glistening in those green eyes I loved so much. “This isn't over, Rainey. We'll talk, alright. We'll talk about how you've already stolen one child from me, and if you think I'm going to let you do it again, you're as insane as you are fucking soulless.”

A sob heaved through me, and on instinct, I reached for him. My Jesse. My rock. My love.

But instead of letting me touch him, he sneered at me and took a step back into his apartment. Then he slammed the door in my face, leaving me pregnant and alone. Again.

How can this be happening again? How did I get back here?

Logically, I knew that I was the one to blame, but I'd never felt so alone. So abandoned. So hopeless. So utterly fucking clueless as to what was going to happen next.

The last couple of days had passed in a complete blur. After Rainey had left my place, I'd spent the rest of the day just sitting on my balcony, staring at nothing while I tried to comprehend what she'd told me.

I had a child. A thriving, seemingly rebellious little girl who stood up for what was right and fiercely protected her friends. A little girl who, now that I knew she was mine, looked so much like me that I'd finally put my finger on why she'd seemed so familiar.

She looked familiar to me because so many of her features were the same ones I saw whenever I looked in the mirror. The resemblance wasn't so obvious that I didn't blame myself for not recognizing it right away, but it was definitely there.

Jenna's eyes were an almost perfect mix of mine and Rainey's—in shape and color. Her hair was lighter than mine, but much darker than her mother's, and the shape of her face had certainly come from me.

I had a twelve-year-old I didn't know much about, but she was mine. Regardless of what I'd told Rainey about doubting her and wanting a paternity test, I already knew she wasn't lying. A paternity test wasn't necessary.

Not for the child I had or the one on the way. *Fuck. I still can't believe I'm even thinking that.*

As I drove onto Callum's ranch, I tried to get a grip on my thoughts. I'd been stuck with me, myself, and I since she'd

left. I'd canceled the sessions I'd had scheduled with clients and all I'd done was write and think. Think and write.

I'd been about to start climbing the walls this morning until Callum had asked me to come over. While I didn't know yet how much I was going to tell him, I needed to talk to somebody and he was the only person I wanted to do it with.

I hadn't said anything when I'd spoken to him this morning about coming over, but as soon as I climbed out of my car and he saw my face, his features fell. "You look like shit."

"Thank you."

"What happened?" he asked as he waved me into his place. "Did someone try to talk to you or something?"

I snorted. "Well, yes. Hayden decided to have a bonding session with me the other day, but that's not what this is about. I can handle people talking to me, you know? As long as they don't do it too often."

"Sure. Sure. As long as they keep to themselves and only greet you every second time they see you?"

"You're an asshole."

He chuckled. "I am, but evidently, I'm the asshole you came to vent to about whatever is bothering you. So go for it. I knew when I called you this morning that something was off. You sounded *hollow*. What's going on?"

I ground my teeth, trying to resist my natural instinct to tell him to mind his own business. I wanted to talk to him. I just had to figure out how. Opening up, especially about something that cut as deep as this, wasn't going to be easy.

As I closed my eyes, I saw Rainey's face when I told her to leave. I saw the pain, the anger, and the hopelessness. I remembered the hope when she'd looked at me just after she'd arrived. Images of her flickered through my mind one after the other like I was watching one of those old timey photo reels from the nineteen twenties, and as they did, the floodgates deep inside me burst.

“Rainey came to see me,” I started, opening my eyes to look at Callum while doing my best to share the hurt she’d caused. “It turns out that she’s pregnant. She says the baby is mine.”

His jaw dropped, his eyes widening so much that they were in real danger of falling right out. “You’re going to be a father?”

“Well, that’s the kicker. I’m already a father. Her twelve-year-old daughter? Also mine.”

Callum wasn’t often speechless. He was the comic relief in my life. The guy who always had a prank, a joke, or an opinion and who wasn’t afraid to share it. Now, however, he was dumbstruck. Silent and staring like he was waiting for me to tell him I was kidding.

When I didn’t, he blinked hard, keeping his eyes shut for a few moments longer than usual. He gave his head an almost imperceptible shake, and then he was looking at me again, jerking his thumb over his shoulder to motion toward the kitchen.

“We’re going to need a really strong coffee for this conversation.”

I nodded. “I’d be lying if I said I haven’t considered taking up drinking again after her visit, but coffee will do it for now.”

Where I came from, one nursed problems with alcohol. The more problems, the more alcohol had been consumed in my house. I’d never been an alcoholic. I’d quit when I’d realized how easily I would become one if I didn’t watch myself.

Ever since Rainey had left, I’d been seriously questioning the wisdom of that decision. Drinking myself into oblivion and staying there for a few days sounded pretty darn good right now, but that was why I wasn’t going to give in.

It sounded too good. It would be too easy to drown my sorrows and to remain at the bottom of a bottle of whiskey until the end of time.

Following Callum to the kitchen, I saw the look he gave me as he powered up his machine. “You haven’t been drinking, though. Have you?”

“No.” I dropped my head and ran my hands from my jaw into my hair, repeating the move a few times while I tried to clear my head. “I just really wanted to, but then I realized that’s exactly why I shouldn’t.”

Since he’d known me back when I had still been drinking and had been there by my side when I made the decision to stop, he knew better than anyone how important my sobriety was to me. Relief washed over his features as he nodded, flashing me a small grin.

“I’m proud of you for that, bro. It can’t have been easy to find out about all of this. You really never knew about the twelve-year-old?”

“Her name is Jenna,” I said defensively, wanting to humanize her for the conversation we were about to have and to protect her from being just some random twelve-year-old who was threatening to change everything about my life as I knew. “I suspected for a minute back in New York. When I met her, there was just something about her that seemed weirdly familiar to me. Then I did the math, and it added up. She could be mine.”

“Did you ask Rainey about it?” He filled two mugs with steaming liquid and handed one over to me.

I accepted it gratefully before walking ahead of him to the deck out back and taking a seat on one of the lounge chairs he had out here. “Yes, I did. I asked a few times, actually. She told me that she understood why I would think that she could be mine, but that Jenna was the product of a one-night stand she’d had when she’d been rebelling against her parents for moving them all to New York.”

“Obviously, you believed her.” He lowered himself into the chair beside mine, carefully holding his mug so he didn’t spill. “Do you believe her now, though? When she says that Jenna and the baby are yours?”

“I, uh, I do,” I admitted. “When she first told me, I didn’t want to. I was so shocked and so pissed off that I said I was going to get a paternity test before I gave her any money.”

“What did she say to that?”

I shrugged. “She said I was the only guy she’s ever been with, but that I was welcome to have the test done.”

“Are you going to do it?”

I shook my head no. “In that moment, I really thought I would get it done, but now that I’ve had some time to think, it’s not necessary to put any of them through that. Jenna is mine. I know it all the way down to my bones. She even looks like me, and I didn’t ask Rainey how far along she was with the baby, but she’s not showing yet. Once again, the timing makes sense.”

Callum took a minute to sip his coffee, silently looking out over his backyard before turning his attention back to me. “Did she tell you why she kept Jenna a secret?”

“Not really. All she said was that she wasn’t going to let her parents *do this* again. I’m not really sure what she meant, but to be honest, I didn’t ask and I didn’t give her a chance to explain. I flipped my lid and I flipped it hard. I wasn’t exactly nice to her.”

“Anyone would understand that. She shows up at your door out of the blue, tells you that she’s pregnant and that you have a teenager you never knew about? That’s rough.”

“Yeah, but what do I do now? I don’t even know if she’s still in Portland or if she’s gone home. My best guess is that she would’ve gone home. I doubt she’d have stuck around after how things went down. Even if she is still around, I don’t know if I’m ready to talk to her.”

A hum of agreement came from the back of his throat. “I get that, but you do know you’re going to have to talk to her sometime, right? You guys are going to have to figure this thing out.”

“I know.” I screwed my eyes shut, swiping my tongue across my lips as I shook my head again. “I just don’t know

how to figure it out. How do we move past something like this? Even working on the assumption that I'm never going to be able to trust her enough to be with her again, I still want to know my children. How do I communicate with her rationally enough to make that happen?"

"Well, if you ask me, it sounds like it wasn't her idea to keep it from you or to leave you in the first place. Maybe you should start by talking to her about all that. Find out why shit went down the way it did and take it from there."

I rubbed the back of my head, staring at the vast lawn that made up his backyard and the trees beyond it. "That's one way to go about it. I'm not sure I'll believe a word that comes out of her mouth at this point, though."

"In that case, take your time. If you need a few more days before you talk to her, take them. Really think about what you want and about the role you want to play in these kids' lives. Just don't take too long. You've already missed twelve years with Jenna. I doubt you want to miss another, or even another few months now that you know."

"You're right. I don't want to miss anything else, but shit. I don't know how to build a relationship with a child that age, much less with a girl that age."

To my surprise, he chuckled. "I don't think anyone really knows how to do it, bro. People just do it. Someone once told me that parenthood is a constant race to keep up. Once you've got one phase figured out, your kid is already in the next one and it's up to you to catch up all over again."

"That sounds so great," I said dryly.

He laughed. "Great or not, that's parenthood for you, and you're a parent now. You have a responsibility toward Jenna to figure it out and you've got a baby on the way that you also have a responsibility to. Life has officially gotten a hell of a lot more complicated for you, Jesse. Good luck."

While I knew that it was much easier said than done, he was right. I did have a responsibility to all three of them. Rainey's parents had never liked me. It was entirely within the

realm of possibility that they'd somehow forced her to keep this from me, and if that was the case, it was also entirely possible that Rainey had taken a big step in coming here and telling me the truth.

I had no idea what was going on in New York or what had been going on over there for the last dozen years, but I knew it was time to find out.

Since I'd taken a few days off to go to Portland, I hadn't gone back to the office immediately upon my return to New York. Things hadn't gone at all like I'd hoped they would with Jesse, but that didn't change what I'd had to do when I'd gotten back.

For the rest of my time off, I'd gone out of my way to avoid my mother. I'd also spent a lot of time with Jenna, and together, we'd scrolled through pages and pages of properties for sale. There were a few places we both liked, and although they weren't quite the kind of places we'd been holding out for all this time, they would all do just fine.

The first house I bought didn't have to be our forever home, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized the impossible bar my mother had set for me when she'd insisted that we stay with them until we could afford the kind of house everyone dreamed about.

Realistically, what that meant was that we'd never move out. We'd stay with them until their time on earth was done, and then we'd stay on in their house without ever having had a place to call our own. I'd been so borderline brainwashed before that I hadn't seen it, but now that I had, there was no turning back.

Jenna and I had a few properties lined up to view later this week, and once we'd seen our options, I'd make a decision. Feeling decidedly calmer for having gotten as far as I had on the housing issue and for being able to let go of the guilt over

keeping the secret from Jesse, I walked into the office with my head held high.

My heart was broken and I had absolutely no idea how I was going to be able to do this alone, but I'd find a way. At least I had a plan, starting with finding a place for the three of us to live. Ellie was waiting in my office when I walked in, an excited smile on her face as she rushed over to give me a hug.

"How did it go? Is Jesse here? Is he reconsidering the move? Or have you figured out how you're going to parent from two different states? Did he love Jenna? Did she love him?"

She fired off the questions so fast that it made my head spin, but unfortunately, there was only one little word that answered almost all of them. "No."

"What do you mean *no*?" She released me immediately, her forehead puckering as worry darkened her eyes.

I sighed, walking around her to drop my things at my desk before sticking my head out the door to ask Rita to bring a real coffee for Ellie and a decaf for me. My friend's eyes tracked my every move when I followed it up with a request for her to hold all my calls and then went to sit down.

By the time she was seated across from me, righteous anger had taken the place of the worry in her gaze. "Are you fucking kidding me? He's not here, he's not reconsidering the move, you haven't figured out what you're going to do, and he still hasn't met Jenna? What the hell is the matter with him?"

"What's the matter with him is that his whole world imploded as soon as he found out. I've never seen him that way. He was so angry. He said so many horrible things. Then he kicked me out without giving me the chance to explain."

Ellie was practically shaking with anger, but then she drew in a deep breath and leaned back in the chair across from my desk. "You know I'm Team Rainey all the way, but he does have a reason to be pissed. Can you even begin to imagine what it must feel like to find out that you have a child you

never knew about and another one on the way all at the same time?”

“I know, and you’re right. He does have a reason to be pissed. I guess it was naïve of me to hope it would go better, but I just really wasn’t expecting him *not* to hear me out at all. I knew he would be angry, but I kind of thought it would end with him demanding an explanation and that we’d work things out after.”

“People react in different ways to something like this,” she said softly. “I was definitely hoping for a better outcome for you two myself, but maybe he’ll come around. Maybe he just needs some time to process.”

“It’s been days,” I said. “I know that’s not a long time in the greater scheme of things, but I don’t think he’s going to come around. He doesn’t want anything to do with us. I’m just grateful that I didn’t tell Jenna where I was going or that there was a possibility of having her father in her life. It’s one thing for me to be heartbroken and disappointed, but it would’ve been a whole different kettle of fish if it was her.”

“I hear you, but at the same time, it’s only been days. You kept this from him for twelve years. It’s not inconceivable that he will still change his mind.”

“I’m not going to be holding my breath.” Tears burned the backs of my eyes, but I breathed through it. “I need to accept the consequences of my actions. It might not have been my idea to hide it from him all these years, but I still went along with it. As much as part of me hates him right now, I don’t blame him. If he comes around, then we’ll talk, but I can’t hold on to the hope that it’s going to happen.”

“At least you’ll always have me,” she said. “I’m not Jesse, but I’m here for you. If you need any help whatsoever, I’ll be there.”

“Thank you.” My voice got all choked up and I shut my eyes, waiting for the wave of emotion to pass before taking a deep breath. “I’m probably going to have to take you up on that. My parents don’t know about the baby yet, but once they

find out that I got knocked up again and that Jesse is the father, they're going to cut all ties with me."

"If they do that, then fuck them," she said vehemently. "A lot of the blame for where you are right now falls squarely on their shoulders. You don't need them."

"I do," I admitted. "They've helped me so much with Jenna and I have no idea how I'm going to get through it without them this time, especially once they learn that we're moving out. They're going to hate me. Hell, they could even sue me."

"We've got a great legal division," she said. Since we'd discussed my parents' threat before, it didn't surprise her that it was still a real worry for me. "I spoke to Holly while you were gone. I didn't tell her who it was, but I said I needed her advice for a friend. She assured me that you have a much stronger case than you think."

"Sure, that's the opinion I got from the lawyer I contacted, too. It doesn't change that I can't really afford litigation, especially not now. Do you have any idea how much a baby costs? The price of childcare by itself is astronomical, and that's without even mentioning the essentials that he or she will need, like diapers or a car seat."

"Did you keep any of Jenna's old stuff?" she asked. "Like the crib and the baby bath?"

"No." I hung my head, fighting back tears once more. "Most of it was stuff we got from our family members here, and even the stuff my parents bought, we got rid of once we were done with it. They sold it all because they told me I wasn't going to have another baby."

"Joke's on them, then," she said, but when I didn't crack a smile or even lift my head, she rallied. "We'll get through this, Rainey. I'm going to be there with you every step of the way. Once you're ready, we'll put word out around the office to find out who's got baby things they're at the point of tossing out. There's sure to be a lot of people around here who have got things lying around that they'll gladly give you."

“So I’m the charity case, then?”

She scoffed. “No. Babies use most things for a total of two minutes, as far as I know. There’s no shame in buying certain things second hand. In fact, my sister says it’s the sensible thing to do. You’ll make people a reasonable offer and it’s up to them to accept or not. It’ll save you money and help them clear out the things they don’t need anymore. It’s a win-win.”

“Maybe,” I agreed, but I also knew that she was right.

In general terms, baby goods were so much more expensive than they had any right to be. It would definitely help if I could buy some things from coworkers I knew would’ve looked after them properly.

“You don’t have to make any decisions right away,” she reminded me. “When the time comes, I’ll help you find bargains. We’ll make sure you’ve got everything you need before the baby comes. Obviously, I’ll also organize a baby shower and I’ll make sure everyone brings you lots of gifts.”

“Thanks for the thought, but I don’t want people thinking they’re only invited because I can’t afford to buy my own diapers. This baby is my responsibility. I conceived it, not my friends. We’ll figure it out, though.”

Rita opened the door, shooting me an apologetic look. “I’m so sorry to interrupt. I’ve been holding your calls, but I’ve got a few people demanding your attention urgently. What should I tell them?”

Ellie got up immediately, and her coffee hadn’t even come yet. “I’m leaving. We’ll talk more later. I’m sure my phone is blowing up, too.”

After waving and blowing me a kiss, she turned to Rita. “Could you ask Aggie to bring my coffee to my desk? I won’t waste any more of Rainey’s time right now. Lord knows, we’ve all got enough on our plates. We don’t need to fall behind on our work.”

Rita nodded, then transferred my first call almost before Ellie was all the way out of my office. The rest of my day passed in much the same way. It was hectic. In and out of

meetings and juggling a few calls at any given moment, I got lost in the humdrum of my day-to-day life, putting my own problems out of my mind for now.

Before I knew it, the day was gone and it was time to leave. I packed up my things quickly, already running late and not wanting to miss dinner with Jenna. She knew about the baby now and she was already fiercely protective of me and the little nugget, constantly reminding me that I had to eat and fervently researching all the best foods to ensure a healthy pregnancy.

It was so sweet that thinking about it put a smile on my face, but only until I got to the parking lot and saw a familiar tall, dark, and handsome man standing by my car. My heart skipped at the sight of him, and all I wanted was to run into Jesse's arms, but I couldn't.

I didn't know what he was doing here, but considering how we'd left things the last time we'd seen each other, I was hardly in any position to get excited. Jesse wouldn't have shown up unannounced if what he was here for wasn't big.

This was either his grand, romantic gesture and we would finally have a shot at our happily ever after, or he was here to yank the rug out from underneath me by making demands about his children. My palms suddenly got sweaty and my stomach turned to ice.

What are you doing here, Jesse Slone? Even as I mentally asked the question, I didn't know if I wanted the answer. Either way, it meant something that he was here. I just didn't know if it was something good or something bad, but as his gaze suddenly landed on mine, I knew I was about to find out.

Whether I wanted to or not.

My heart thudded in an uncomfortable rhythm against my ribs. Everything I'd thought I'd known about my life had already changed, and it was about to change again.

Rainey's face paled as her eyes locked on mine in the semi-darkness of the parking lot. It looked a little like she'd seen a ghost, and I hated the fear that came with that look. I was here for answers, not to cause any trouble.

"Can we talk?" I asked when she was close enough that I could've touched her if I hadn't been such an asshole when she'd come to Portland.

She hesitated, but then gave me a curt nod. "We can't do it at my place, though. I'd also prefer not to do it in public. Where are you staying?"

"A hotel not too far from here. Would you be okay with coming back there with me?" After the way I'd behaved the last time she'd seen me, I wouldn't have blamed her for not being comfortable with going to my hotel room.

With her eyes still glued to mine, I saw the gears turning in her head before she finally realized that we didn't have many other options available to us. I'd been prepared to have the conversation we needed to have at a park or in a restaurant, but I also understood why she didn't want to have it out in public.

If it turned into another screaming match, the last thing either of us would want was an audience. "Yeah. Okay. Let's go to your hotel. Do you want a ride?"

“If that’s okay with you.” When she unlocked her car and nodded toward the passenger seat, I assumed it meant she was okay with it.

The only word either of us said on the way over was when I told her the name of the hotel. For the rest, we were quiet as church mice, and since I knew I was trying to get my thoughts in order before we talked, I figured it was a safe bet that she was doing the same thing.

Once we got to my suite, she turned to me with that fear still in her wide blue eyes. “What do you want, Jesse? Why are you here?”

I swallowed past the pain in my throat. “First things first, I’m sorry for how I reacted the other day. You don’t ever have to be afraid of me, Rainey. I’d never hurt you and I’m not here to try to take your kids away.”

A trickle of relief appeared in those eyes, but it really was only a trickle. She was still scared. Still uncertain. But at least she nodded and went to the sitting area in my suite, taking a seat on one of the armchairs before turning back to me.

“I hope it’s okay if I sit. I don’t really trust my knees right now. I can’t feel them. They went numb as soon as I saw you.”

“I get that, and it’s fine, but I wish you’d told me before you’d driven us over here.” My tone was light, and she relaxed a little when she heard it, but she still seemed apprehensive.

“If you didn’t come here to take the kids away, what are you doing here?”

Bracing my hands on the back of the chair facing hers, I held on tight and said the only words that had ever made my own knees feel a little numb. “I’m here because I want to be a father. I want to be there for you during this pregnancy and I want to be there for my children.”

Her jaw grew slack and her brows jumped up high on her forehead. “Are you sure? You told me to get out. I didn’t think I was ever going to hear from you again.”

I licked my lips before rolling them into my mouth. “I’m also here to apologize for all that. Believe it or not, I really am

sorry that I kicked you out and that I didn't give you the opportunity to explain. I just..."

I dragged in a breath through my nostrils and released it slowly, trying to keep a handle on myself this time around. "It was the biggest shock I've ever gotten, Rainey. I wish I'd have taken it better, but you knocked me right on my ass and it was like my brain left my body."

Her gaze searched mine. "How are you feeling about it now?"

"Calmer," I admitted. "I needed some time to get my shit together and my head right before I saw you again, which is why I didn't come after you sooner."

"You're here now," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "When you say that you want to be a father and that you want to be there for us, what do you mean exactly? Do you mean that you want to send us money from the other side of the country and spend some time with Jenna while you're here? Or do you mean that you want us to be a family?"

"I don't know." There was a flash of disappointment in her eyes, but I wasn't done yet. "I guess that depends on how this conversation goes. I'll be honest with you, though. When you first told me Jenna wasn't mine, I was a lot more disappointed than you probably are right now. I realized then that I wanted her to be mine. Badly. Just like I badly want you to be mine and for us to raise this baby together, but I have no idea where you're at in all this, and frankly, I don't know how to get past it myself."

"Are you ready for me to explain why I kept it a secret from you for so long?"

I nodded, letting go of the chair and walking around it to sit down. "Before we get to that, how are you feeling? Are you okay? Is the baby?"

Surprise made her nostrils flare and her eyes widened before she blinked a few too many times. "I, uh, I'm fine. I've got some morning sickness and my emotions are all over the place, but it's manageable."

“That’s good.” Some of the tension in my chest eased.

These last few days, I’d been more worried than I let myself admit that our fight might’ve affected her health or the baby’s. “Okay, if it gets too much for you, just tell me and we can keep talking tomorrow. I’m ready to listen now, though. It’s up to you to tell me as much as you’re willing to, but I don’t want to stress you out.”

A nervous, surprised giggle escaped from her. “You don’t want to stress me out? Do you have any idea how stressed I’ve been since I found out about this pregnancy? Trust me, having a conversation with you is nothing on that. I’ll be fine, but thank you for the concern.”

“Of course. I’m sorry you’ve been stressed and I’m sorry for making it worse. I’ve been reading up on pregnancy, and apparently, you’re not supposed to be placed under any extra stress.”

“You’re not supposed to be, but life is life. Most people are extra stressed at one point or another during their pregnancies and the babies are usually fine. Jenna, for instance, is the best, and my pregnancy with her was a nightmare.”

“Do you want to tell me why?”

She hesitated, but I had a feeling that it was only because she was trying to decide where to start. Once she did, her eyes took on a far-away quality and her hands went to her stomach in a way that made me wonder if she was even aware that she was doing it. It looked like more of a subconscious movement, an instinctive need to protect and comfort the baby growing inside her even if it couldn’t feel it just yet.

At least, I didn’t think it could, but I didn’t know much about the beginning phases of life. For all I knew, it could sense these things from its mother long before it understood what they were.

When Rainey started speaking, I quieted my mind and tried my best to listen without interrupting. “I’m not sure if you’ll remember this, but the last time we saw each other in high school, I had to get home because my mother was waiting

for me. When I got there, she had a pregnancy test in her hand. I refused to take it at first, but eventually, she won.”

An unpleasant stabbing sensation traveled through me, but I kept my mouth shut. I’d been waiting a long time to hear this story.

“When I went to the bathroom to take the test, she came with me and she stayed until the results were in. As soon as I saw I was pregnant, I was excited. I knew it wouldn’t be easy for us, but I immediately started building this silly fantasy in my head of the two of us raising the baby together.”

She sighed, tears brimming in her eyes as she looked back at me. “I was so absorbed in my own feelings that I didn’t see my mother’s face at first, but she was hysterical. She told me right there and then that she wasn’t going to let us play house together and that I wasn’t ever going to see you again.”

Swiping at the tears that spilled down her cheeks, she sucked in a shuddering breath as she shook her head. “She told me she would handle it, but not what she was going to do. That same night, she told me to start packing. It turned out that my dad had gotten a job offer in New York, and because she had family here, they decided it was the best way to get me away from you.”

Those old scabs I’d thought had healed over years ago started bleeding again, but from the remembered pain in Rainey’s eyes, I wasn’t the only one still hurting about it. Pushing to my feet, I walked over to where she was sitting, sinking down on my knees between her legs and taking her hands, relieved when she let me hold on to them.

“It was horrible, Jesse,” she whispered. “The worst of it was that I didn’t have a choice. I even thought about running away, but she’d know that I would’ve stayed close to you. She would’ve found me. Us.”

Pure, unadulterated hatred slammed into me. “She had no right to take that away from us. You might’ve thought it was a silly fantasy, but I would’ve made a plan. I would’ve been there for you. I would’ve helped you. We could’ve made it work.”

“I know.” She cupped my cheek, gently stroking it as rivulets of tears streamed down her cheeks. “She did have a right to do it, though. As much as I hated her for it, I am her child. I was underage and I didn’t have any money. She thought she was protecting me.”

“I’m assuming she’s also the reason you never reached out to me after that?”

Rainey’s watery eyes held mine for a beat before she nodded and dropped yet another bombshell on my head. “She said that if I ever contacted you again, she would take my baby from me. According to her, every judge in the country would give her custody if she asked for it. The thing is that she never stopped making that threat, Jesse. We might be all grown up now, but when she finds out about this, she’s going to try to take our children away from us. Both of them.”

A hundred emotions raced through Jesse's dark green eyes as he stared up at me, but the most powerful ones of them all were disbelief and rage. His shoulders were so tense that he resembled a statue and his teeth were clenched so hard I was afraid they would crack.

Before he recovered enough to say anything, I needed to get the last bit of the story out. He needed to know where I was now.

"When I found out I was pregnant again, it was like my whole world came crumbling down, but after it did, it was like I could see the things that had been lurking behind the walls she built around me. It felt almost like in the debris, I could finally see things for what they were, so I contacted a lawyer."

"Fuck yes," he breathed, blinking past the rage and disbelief so I could see the hope and understanding that had been born beneath them. "What did they say?"

"Basically that my parents don't have much of a chance. Nothing is impossible, obviously, but it's unlikely that they'd succeed in any claim for custody. In the past, their prospects of success were much better but now, things have changed. We're both adults with jobs, and money, and places to stay. We've got stable income and clean lifestyles..."

A sob tore through me as I lowered my head. "I'm just so sorry that I didn't speak to someone sooner. If I had, I'd have known that I was free to tell you the truth and that her threats

were empty. I didn't know, though. Whenever she talked about it, she sounded so sure. I never doubted her for a minute."

"She manipulated you, Rainey. That's not your fault. I wish you'd have told me sooner, because I would've been able to tell you years ago that it was bullshit, but only because I wasn't under her influence. You were, baby. You're still living in her house and you said last time I was here that she helps you out with Jenna a lot. I hate her for it, but I understand why you'd have been as scared as you obviously were."

"Yeah, but then you were here and you asked me about Jenna's paternity, and I lied. I shouldn't have lied. I should've been honest with you and trusted that we could work it out together, but I wasn't expecting the school to call me that morning. I wasn't expecting that you'd insist on tagging along and I didn't have time to think up an excuse for you not to. Everything just happened so fast that I told you the same lie about who her father was that I've been telling her whole life."

"It's okay, Rainey. I mean, it's not okay, but I get it." He tilted his head back until he was looking right into my eyes. Then he rose up on his knees and let go of my hands to take my face between his. With his eyes only a few inches from mine, there was no mistaking the intensity of the feeling behind them when he said his next words. "I love you, Rainey. I always have and I always will. This is a shit show, but we'll get through it. We'll just have to take it one step at a time."

"You love me?" I managed to say between sobs of sadness and joy combined. It was the strangest thing I'd ever felt, but it was what it was.

Jesse and I had lost so much of what could've been, and yet here we were. He was here and he was telling me that he loved me. That we'd get through this. Together.

"Of course, I love you," he murmured as he brought his face closer to mine. "Have you met you? It's impossible not to love you, Rainey Hollenbeck. At least, that's how I feel about you. God knows, I've tried not to love you, but I can't help it. I just do. I love you."

“I love you too,” I whispered, closing the distance between our lips and pressing mine to his as my hands snaked around his neck. I pulled him as close as I could get him. Then I sank down onto his lap and kissed him with all the love I’d always had for him.

After all this time, it was difficult to believe that we were finally here. Or that all it had taken to get here had been one honest conversation.

Okay, well not quite only a conversation. Jesse and I had been through so much and all of it had led to this one conversation and to it going the way it had, but none of that mattered anymore. He was here and he loved me. I loved him and he’d said he wanted to be a father.

How it was going to work, I didn’t know yet. He still hated New York and I wasn’t sure about moving to Portland. Not that he’d asked, but I’d been thinking about it. My job and Jenna’s school were here.

So were her friends and her life. I could get another job, but I’d never just yank her away from everything she knew and loved like my parents had done to me. We still had a lot to figure out. The logistics of it all might’ve been overwhelming if I was paying much attention to them, but I wasn’t.

The only thing I could really concentrate on was that I was in Jesse’s arms and that he was holding on to me like he was never going to let me go. As our kisses grew harder and more meaningful, it suddenly wasn’t only his arms I was thinking about anymore.

As messed up as it was, the pregnancy hormones had been wreaking havoc on my libido. Every time I’d closed my eyes, memories of my times with Jesse had played out in my head and it’d worked me up until I’d been swollen and aching for him.

A few times, I’d even given in to the urges. In the dark of night and alone in my room, but every time after, I’d cried. Pregnancy was fun that way. One minute, I’d be coming down from the high, and the next, I’d be sobbing because I was alone. Because I missed him so much that it hurt and because I

was so scared of raising another baby—and a teenager—without him.

Now that he was here, my libido was in the highest gear it'd ever been and I was panting for him long before I should've been. When I squirmed on his lap, bearing down on him and moaning as I rolled my hips, he abruptly broke our feverish kiss.

With a knowing gleam in his eyes and an amused smirk on his lips, he pulled back to look at me. "I've read about this. It's supposed to be one of the fun parts of pregnancy."

I practically clawed at him to get him back to me, my breasts hurting to have his hands on them and my panties so soaked that I was pretty sure his jeans were wet. I moaned again when he ran his hands up and down my sides, my hips bucking to get to his.

"It's not so fun for me," I admitted, my cheeks hot and probably flushed as hell. "At least, it hasn't been until now."

"Well, that's about to change," he said decisively, sliding out from underneath me and ignoring my mewl of protest when he stood up.

Offering me his hand, he pulled me to my feet and took me to the bed, standing me at the foot of it while he undressed me. He wasn't wasting any time, but it felt like it took him an eternity as he removed my clothing one piece at a time.

When I was finally naked, he sucked in a sharp breath as he ran his gaze all over me before laying me down on the mattress behind me. Thankfully, he seemed to realize that I wasn't in the mood to play right now.

Still fully clothed, he crawled between my legs and gave me what I needed twice before he stopped long enough to allow me to undress him. Despite the fact that I'd already had two powerful orgasms, I was more than ready for him when he sank into me without a condom for the first time.

I still didn't know how I'd managed to get pregnant despite our use of protection, but I had a feeling it was because Jesse and I had always been destined to be together. The

sensations were incredible, making little sparks of pleasure shoot through me with every move he made—even his deep, uneven breathing.

We made love for hours that night, only coming up for air so I could tell Jenna I wouldn't be home. I promised to explain it all to her in the morning, then mentioned that she was going to like what I had to say.

She replied with a heart-eyed emoji, telling me she was fine and that Grandma was behaving herself. I showed the text to Jesse and he smiled, but then he kissed me again and we fell back into each other. It was hands-down the best night of my life, but as we lay there in the aftermath, reality threatened to ruin it all.

“Do you want to get room service?” he murmured, stroking my back with one hand while I lay with my head on his chest. “I just realized we never even got dinner.”

I glanced at the clock on the nightstand. “It's nearly two a.m., but sure. Let's get dinner.”

Chuckling as he reached for the landline, he held the phone in his free hand but didn't sit up or ask me to move, so I stayed put. While we were in this bubble, nothing could hurt us, but I was so afraid that as soon as we moved or started talking again, everything would come crashing down around us.

“How do you feel about grilled cheese and tomato soup?” he asked softly. “It's the ultimate comfort food for me. Sound good?”

“Definitely.”

He placed our order, but once he was done, he rolled over to face me instead of just lying back down. Forest green eyes intent on mine, he ran his fingertips up my arm and shoulder as he frowned. “What's going on in that head of yours? You seem worried again.”

“That's because I am,” I said, moving my gaze from one of his eyes to the other and back again. “Are you sure you want to do this, Jesse? Because if you're not, you need to tell me

right now. I love you, but I never want you to feel like you didn't have a choice."

The most beautiful smile I'd ever seen from him appeared on his lips before he leaned in to kiss the tip of my nose. "I've never been more sure of anything. I want you in my life, Rainey. All of you. I know there's a lot we need to work out, and it's going to take me some time to come to terms with everything, but I'll get there. We'll get there."

"You're absolutely sure? Once we tell Jenna, there's no turning back. I just..." I blinked away the tears that were threatening to overwhelm me again. "I just don't want either of you to get hurt, but I also don't want to get hurt again myself either."

"You won't. Not because of me, anyway. I'm here, Rainey. I'm not going anywhere, and I hate to break it to you, but neither are you. We're in this together now, and I'm never letting you leave again."

Two days after I'd landed in New York, Rainey and I were on our way to her house. We'd taken these last couple of days to talk and to ease into things, but now, I was about to meet my daughter—officially—for the first time.

Jenna knew now who I was and that I was coming. It was another reason we hadn't told her the very next day.

Rainey had wanted to spend some time alone with her first to prepare her. While she'd done that, I'd been busy preparing myself.

The fact of the matter was that I had no clue what to expect. She could love me and take me at my word that I'd have been there for her from her very first breath if I'd known about her, but there was also a massive possibility that she would hate me and refuse to give me a chance.

Just before we turned into their street, Rainey reached for my hand on the gear lever of my rental car and gave it a gentle squeeze. "You have nothing to be nervous about. She's excited to meet you. I know that this is a big day for both of you, but it's going to go well."

I glanced at her when I slowed at a stop sign. "It's going to go well? Didn't you say that your mother was home?"

"Yep." Her features hardened a little. "I tried to get her out of the house today to give you and Jenna a little privacy, but she knows something is going on. We could still change our plans and just pick Jenna up instead of staying at home."

“No,” I said firmly. “I have to face your mother at some point and I want to be there when you tell her about the baby. If she breathes a word of her bullshit threats, I want to be there to help her understand that if she tries anything, it’ll be the biggest mistake of her life.”

“Sure, I know, but it doesn’t all need to happen on the same day. This is about you and Jenna, not about us and my mother.”

“Didn’t she ask to meet me at home?”

Rainey sighed. “She did. I told her you’d be willing to meet her anywhere, and she chose to do it here. She said that she didn’t want people gawking at you or at her and that she didn’t want to risk being interrupted by someone any of us knows.”

“That’s still surprisingly mature for a twelve-year-old,” I murmured. “Either way, she’s right. No one wants people gawking at us or to be interrupted. Obviously, your house is her safe space. I guess we could take her to the hotel, but you told her that was an option, right?”

She nodded. “Yes, I did. She said she’d like to see where you’re staying sometime, but that she’d prefer to meet you at home. She wants to show you some of her stuff and some of our old pictures of her, I guess.”

“Well, then we’re not just picking her up. It might’ve made it easier if we didn’t have to deal with your mother at the same time, but I’m not taking our daughter out of her comfort zone for your mother’s sake. Have you told her you guys are moving out yet?”

“No, I thought it was best to get today over with first. You and Jenna are what’s the most important to me right now. My mom is going to put up a fight over us moving, and I didn’t want that to detract from your moment.”

As we pulled up outside their house, the front door opened and Rainey’s mother slipped out, closing it firmly behind her. My jaw clenched at the sight of the wretched woman. Her hair was a little grayer than it used to be and her face a little more

lined, but the last twelve years hadn't aged her so much that I didn't recognize her instantly.

Hatred and distaste twisted her prim features as soon as she spotted me through the window of the car, and it was obvious that she'd recognized me as well. Since her hatred and distaste didn't hold a candle to my own, I ignored it.

Game on, you manipulative bitch. I'd lost the last round without even knowing what she was playing at, but I was all in this time. It wasn't a game to me. It was my life. My children. The woman I was going to make my wife.

I wasn't losing this round, and she could come at me as much and as hard as she wanted. She wouldn't win, and she was delusional if she thought she even stood a chance.

"No," she seethed as soon as we climbed out of the car. Folding her arms over her chest, she stepped in front of the door like she was physically going to keep me out of her house. "You turn around and go right back to whatever sewer you crawled out of, Jesse Slone. There's nothing here for you."

Rainey appeared at my side after walking around the car, taking my hand in hers and holding it tight. "He's not going anywhere, Mother. Jenna is his daughter, and he has every right to be part of her life. This has gone on for long enough."

"Over my dead body," she sneered. "I told you once, Rainey. This scum is never going to be part of your life or hers. He's a deadbeat. A lowlife. A—"

"A famous songwriter who just so happens to be more successful than you ever were," I said, cutting her off and narrowing my eyes as I squared my shoulders. "I don't really care what you think. Jenna is my daughter. Rainey and I have talked about it, and we're going to be raising her together from now on. You can either be a part of the life we're going to make together or not, but we don't need your permission. Honestly, I'd rather you choose not to be a part of it, but that's not up to me."

"You're not taking this child from me," she warned, lifting a shaky finger and stabbing it in the air at both of us. "Neither

of you are capable of raising a child. You're still children yourself. Jenna needs more love and stability than either of you are able to provide by yourselves. Any judge in—"

"I'm going to stop you right there," I said, sliding my phone out of my pocket and releasing Rainey's hand for a minute to stride up to her mother. "This is an email from my lawyer. As you can see, he's already prepared the restraining order. Don't make us file it. You'll also notice that I've already paid him a retainer fee for any lawsuit he might have to handle on our behalf, and underneath that, there's confirmation from him that there's no legal precedent that will allow you to succeed under the circumstances."

The creak of the door behind her drew my gaze up over her shoulder, and my heart jumped into my throat when I suddenly found myself looking into the blue-green eyes of my daughter. She took a tentative step out the door, her gaze flitting away from mine to take in the scene in front of her before she walked around her grandmother with her full attention focused on me.

"Are you really my father?" she asked, her voice quiet and incredulous. "You stood up for me that day in the car. I remember."

She glanced at Rainey. "I didn't really believe you when you said it was that guy."

Rainey ignored her mother, who was still glaring at my phone in her hand with her spine rigid and murder scrawled all over her features. Smiling at our daughter instead, she came to stand next to us. "Jenna, this is Jesse Slone. The client I was trying to woo, but also your father."

I wasn't sure whether to shake her hand or to give her a wave, but the next minute, she launched herself at me and clung to me like a koala to its mother. My arms closed around her, emotion tightening my throat when I realized I was hugging my daughter for the first time.

"You'll be hearing from my lawyer," Mrs. Hollenbeck muttered angrily before I heard the thud of my phone being dropped on the ground, but I didn't let go of Jenna.

I could buy a new phone and fight a legal battle, but this moment was priceless and I wasn't letting her steal it from us like she had stolen an entire lifetime worth of them already. The door slammed behind her, but since Jenna was still hanging onto me, I didn't let go of her either.

She was sobbing in my arms, her tears wetting my T-shirt, but again, I didn't care. She could do whatever she wanted with every T-shirt I had and I still wouldn't care. Everything was replaceable but her.

When she eventually let go of me, she fell straight into Rainey's arms, still sobbing and not saying a word. My own tears were flowing freely down my cheeks, and when I met Rainey's gaze above our daughter's head, she nodded at me.

Understanding what she meant, I cleared my throat to explain I wasn't leaving before I went to the car. "I have a song for you. I'm just going to get my guitar."

While I went to grab it, Rainey sat Jenna down on the steps and kept an arm around her shoulders as she stared at me like she was afraid I would disappear. As I slung the strap of the guitar around me, I swallowed back a tide of emotion myself and cleared my throat again.

"I know your mom has already explained to you why I've never been around before, but I want you to know that from now on, I'm going to be here for you. We might only be meeting each other properly for the first time today, but I feel like you've been in my heart your whole life. I've never been very good at expressing myself, so I wrote you a song because it's the best way I know to say the things I want to say."

As I started playing it, she listened intently. More tears rolled down her cheeks, but since she was smiling, I took it as a good sign. Rainey and I were both crying with her by the time I finished, but then Jenna stood up and came over to me, waiting for me to shift the guitar to my back before she wound her arms around me again.

"I'm so glad you're finally here, Daddy. Is it okay if I call you that?"

“Of course.” It was simultaneously the best and the most heartbreaking moment of my life. Things changed for me in ways I never would’ve expected to hear her call me that, but it devastated me that she’d even felt like she had to ask.

As she hugged me and Rainey came to join in, putting her arms around both of us and holding us close, I knew that we had a long road ahead of us, but I also knew that there was no one I would rather have wanted to take the journey with. We were finally together, and nothing and no one would ever tear us apart again.

EPILOGUE

RAINEY

One Year Later

Life with a tiny baby and a soon-to-be newly minted teenager was interesting—to say the least. Jenna adored her baby brother and she was nuts about her father, but she still needed me. Especially now that the teenage angst was becoming a real thing.

Baby Mason needed me too, just in a very different way. I'd never thought I'd have the privilege of having another baby, much less one that I'd be raising with his father. It was a whole different kettle of fish this time around, but as busy as it was to suddenly have three people who needed my time, I wouldn't have had it any other way.

As I stared down at the sleeping baby in my arms, I smiled softly, sometimes still struggling to believe that this really was my life now. I didn't live with my parents anymore and it wasn't Jenna and I against the world.

Instead, we now had Jesse at the front line, and he took his role as a father seriously. From parent-teacher meetings to midnight feedings, he did it all. He'd adapted surprisingly well and surprisingly fast to fatherhood, and it suited him down to a tee.

So much so that he was already starting to make noises about a third one. I wasn't opposed to the idea, but I hadn't even gone back to work yet after baby number two. Jesse and I had agreed that I'd stay home with him for a year.

It was what I'd wanted and he'd made it happen, even talking Max into letting me take the sabbatical. He'd argued that I deserved to really be able to cherish this time after what I'd been through when I'd had Jenna, and upon hearing the whole story, Max had agreed wholeheartedly.

On the condition that I do some work remotely with the clients who insisted on being represented by me personally. It worked for me, especially since Jesse had overhauled the study at our house and had built a proper remote office for us—complete with a recording studio and video-conferencing facilities so good that when we were in the conference room, it felt like we were sitting around the table with the people we were meeting with.

So far, our life together was interesting, hectic, and so darn good that it brought tears to my eyes when I thought about it all. Since Jesse was now working with Gravity, it felt like things had finally worked out the way they were always meant to be.

We lived together. We worked together. We were raising our children together.

It was perfect. I loved every second of it, but there was one thing that was bugging me just a little bit. Whatever. I had no doubt that Jesse was fully committed to us.

He'd sold his place in Portland, taken the job with Gravity, and moved across the country to be with us. All without any argument.

He did homework with Jenna and changed Mason's diapers. Late at night, we lay together in bed and talked and laughed for hours, dreaming together and finally sharing every sordid detail of our pasts.

I now knew about his parents and what his life had really been like growing up. I knew about the abuse he'd endured at the hands of his father and how his mother had flown the coop.

In return, I'd told him all about how bad those first few years after we'd left Texas had really been and how my mother had broken me down to nothing but a worthless teenager

who'd messed up and would spend the rest of her life paying for it.

Jesse and I cried at times and fought at others, but we'd laughed more than anything else. When we bickered, we always made up and we made up good. That wasn't what I was worried about. What was bugging me was that we'd talked about marriage but he still hadn't proposed. I wanted to be married to him.

I knew a lot of people thought of it as an outdated institution with no more significance than a piece of paper, but I didn't feel that way. I'd always been a romantic who believed in love and happily ever afters, and for me, marriage was a big part of that.

The boom of the front door slamming yanked me out of my thoughts. For just a second, I frowned, but then I heard their voices and I stood up carefully, glad the sound hadn't woken Mason.

Moving slowly to his crib, I bent over and laid him down gently. Then I straightened up and tiptoed out of the nursery. I found my gorgeous girl and her totally hot-for-a-dad father joking around as they set down their stuff in our foyer.

"There you are," I said, smiling as I headed for Jenna first. "How was school today?"

She beamed at me after accepting a quick hug. "It was good. Nothing interesting to report. How's my brother?"

"He's fine," I said cautiously, eyeing the light in her eyes with a foreboding sense of curiosity blooming in my gut. "Are you sure there's nothing interesting to report? You seem to be in a particularly good mood."

She laughed. "I'm great, Mom. Really. Where's Mason?"

"Sleeping." I kept an eye on her from the corner of my own, but then Jesse caught hold of my wrist and twirled me into him.

Caught off guard, I giggled and crashed into his chest, then yelped when he dipped me in his arms and laid a kiss on my lips that felt like a lot more than just hello. Jenna howled with

laughter beside us, and Jesse waggled his brows at me when he finally helped me back to my feet.

“Hi, beautiful,” he murmured. “My day was good, too. Thanks for asking. They’re missing you at the office, though. Ellie said she’s going to come by this weekend and make a case for you to go back earlier than planned.”

“I’d like to see her try,” I said honestly. “I miss them too, but not as much as I love being here when you guys get home and spending time with Mason. Does anyone want to tell me what’s going on, though? You two have been conspiring. I can see it in your eyes, so don’t lie to me.”

Jenna froze and glanced at her father, but he grinned at me and linked his fingers through mine. “I never lie to you, love. We just haven’t been conspiring. There’s nothing to say.”

I sighed, but before I could continue the inquisition, Mason gave an almighty yell from the nursery. I started backing toward it, waving my finger at them both in a way that I hoped they knew meant business.

“As soon as I get him settled, you two are talking. There’s definitely something going on with you.”

As I started turning, Jenna suddenly breezed by me, shooting me an innocent smile over her shoulder. “I’ll get him, Mom. I missed him. Why don’t you stay here with Dad?”

I frowned, my spidey senses tingling. As she hurried down the hall toward the nursery, I put my hands on my hips and turned to Jesse, his own features a mask of joyous innocence as he batted his lashes at me.

“What?” he asked. “You heard her. She missed him, is all. Since she’s got him, do you want to come for a walk with me?”

“Uh, okay?” Confused but more curious than ever, I followed him out to our porch and then into our backyard.

It was beautiful out here, a real dream come true. We had more space than I’d ever imagined having, including a sparkling swimming pool, a deck we often had dinner on, and rolling green lawns with a forest of trees beyond it. It was the

kind of place where a child could gallivant and play for hours. It was a place where we could breathe and bond as a family, and where we could entertain to our hearts' content.

In my wildest fantasies of where I'd be living in five years, I'd never have imagined back then that it was even a remote possibility that I'd be someplace like this. Jesse only let go of my hand when we reached the flower garden our bedroom and the kids' bedrooms looked out on.

Surrounded by pops of color and buds of new life, he gave me a smile that stole my breath and made my heart skip in my chest. "When we moved here and I said I was going to make sure you always had all the flowers I wasn't able to give you over the years, I know you didn't believe me."

I rolled my eyes, but it was true. "You made it happen, but why are we out here?"

I had spit up on my shirt and my hair looked like it'd been dipped in oil. While I loved spending time with him no matter where we were or what I looked like, I wasn't really in the mood for a stroll down memory lane—or through our own garden—while I was in such desperate need of a shower.

He chuckled, reaching for my hands as he slowly started lowering himself down onto one knee. I'd only just caught my breath, but it left me again once I realized what was happening.

"I knew this was a setup," I murmured, and his eyes lit in twin flames of adoration and love as he shrugged.

"There was no way you weren't going to pick up on it, but I'm glad we got you this far without you getting suspicious." He tightened his grip on my hands. "I have loved you since before I even knew your name, and even if I miraculously live so long that I get old enough to forget it all over again, I will still love you. You have a way of making me feel things I never thought I was capable of. In my darkest days as a kid, you were my light. You made me feel joy and love even when my world was devoid of those things. Life dealt us a pretty rotten hand for a while there, and yet you didn't let any of it change you. You grew up, but you didn't lose your light or

your ability to love the rude, mean guy who spelled trouble. You've always managed to see me not only for who I am, but for who I could be. You have believed in me and shown me that life really can be wonderful. You've also given me the two greatest gifts a man can receive. You are my heart and soul, my voice of reason, and my home. Would you please do me the honor of now also becoming my wife?"

As he let go of my hands to produce a velvet-covered box, I glanced at the bedroom window. With both of our kids watching, I smiled and squealed, not even waiting to see the ring before I threw my arms around him.

"Of course, I will. I love you, Jesse Slone. I love you so much and I was wondering if you'd changed your mind about getting married."

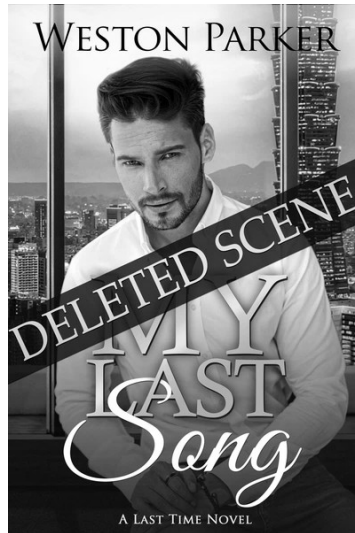
I cried all of this into his chest as I held on to him, and he vibrated with laughter as I felt his head shaking above my own. "I could never change my mind about you, baby. Jenna and I just thought it was better to wait until we'd all settled in rather than bombarding you with wedding planning while we were moving in or we had a newborn."

When he finally eased me out of his arms and slid a simple golden ring with three diamonds on the band onto my finger, I nearly fainted. Not for the first time since he'd come back into my life, I had to pinch myself to make sure that this was real.

It was.

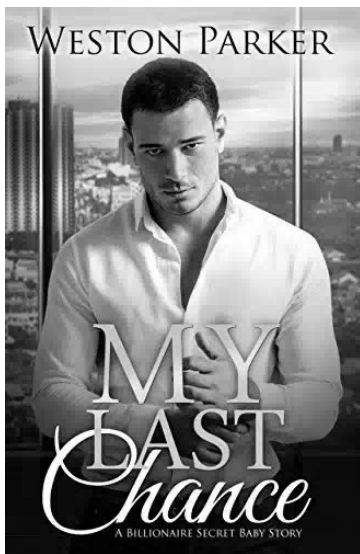
One day soon, I was going to be Mrs. Rainey Slone and Jesse and I would finally get our hard-won happily ever after. We and our two children, and the one I was already pregnant with but didn't know about just yet.

Did you just love Jesse and Rainey? I've got a special deleted scene for you!! [Get your copy HERE!!](#)



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I'VE MADE lots of mistakes.

But never one like this.

Back in high school, the girl next door spent a serendipitous night in my arms. But she wasn't my type or really up to my level.

So I walked away not knowing her secret—our secret.

Years later, I'm still at the top of my game, ruling my own chunk of the world.

She walks into my office a different woman. Strong, sexy, and dead set on revenge.

I need to walk away again, but I can't. She's a different person, and yet, all the things that first had me taking a chance with her pull me back in—deeper this time.

She's going to wreck my life, one bad decision at a time, and fuck me, I'm going to let her.

The fact that the little man who calls her mom acts like me stops me in my tracks. He even loves the same things I do.

Surely not.

No damn way I've been a selfish bastard and haven't considered the possibilities of our night together so long ago, but it's true.

He's mine, and I'm instantly in love with both of them.

I need one more chance, and I'll do anything to get it.

[I gotta have this!](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hey there. I'm Weston.

Have we met? No? Well, it's time to end that tragedy.

I'm a former firefighter/EMS guy who's picked up the proverbial pen and started writing bad boy romance stories. I co-write with my sister, Ali Parker, but live in Texas with my wife, my two little boys, my daughter, a dog, and a turtle.

Yep. A turtle. You read that right. Don't be jealous.

You're going to find Billionaires, Bad Boys, Military Guys, and loads of sexiness. Something for everyone hopefully. I'd love to connect with you. Check out the links below and come find me.

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My Last Song

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